

Life in Anantharam

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Chapter 1

My village, Anantaram, like many others, is not famous for anything.

Anantaram was earlier in Nagulapadu pargana, Suryapet taluk, Nalgonda district. My family had been living in this village from the days of our ancestors. Maybe our ancestors were from a village called Devulapalli; maybe that's why our house name¹ is Devulapalli.

Our house (midde)² was at one end of the village with the dora's motabavi ³in front. At the edge of the well stood a banyan tree with two toddy⁴ trees in its middle, as if sprouting outwards from it.⁵ Close by were agricultural fields. On one side was a cattle shed, beside it haystacks, and manure heaps. There was a house in front of ours. Villagers from Kampadu and Dosapadu and travellers were up and about from dawn when the waterwheel began rolling till evening when the lamps were lit. Those who knew us stopped by to smoke a chutta.⁶ They a drink of water, rested a while and went on their way to the village.

Lying covered with a sheet, I could hear Dasari Ramaiah singing at a distance while turning the waterwheel.



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- 1 People in Andhra Pradesh have, like many other states in South India, a house name. This is usually prefixed to the name and sometimes, the caste names follows the name – as in Kasu (house name) Brahmananda (name) Reddy (caste name.)
 - 2 Rarely is the generic name for house used in Telangana. The house is either a midde (beamed roof filled with tar and earth), or a gudise (thatched hut) or a kavvelu (tiled roof) one.
 - 3 A well, prior to the times of electricity and diesel pumps, when water was pulled out by oxen
 - 4 The toddy tree yields both toddy fruit and toddy drink, the latter tapped by the Goundla caste and fermented for a light kick
 - 5 Birds would have dropped toddy seed onto the banyan tree, and this would germinate on the tree, giving rise to another tree on this one.
 - 6 Locally made cigar

(She says) *Oh, hero at the well,
Why can't you tell me the name of the well?*
(He says) *The name of the well is Mohanangi⁷
Listen, dear!
The name of the well's ring⁸ is Bheemaragam⁹*

(she) *I thought you would be at the well
I brought a pot for water
Neither were you nor the oxen there
Listen, dear!
I filled the pot with my tears.*

*You have never spoken to my elder brothers
Face to face (about our marriage)
(he) We are young and youth is passionate
Listen, dear!
It would lead to a quarrel*

*Like the moon breaking through the hills on the horizon
Does not need sandalwood paste to brighten it
Listen, dear!
Why does a good woman need to beautify herself?*

*Sita was born and (then) Lanka was destroyed
Shiva's¹⁰ anklets erupted¹¹
Rama and Lakshmana were born
Listen, dear!
Lanka was harmed.*

I could hear the birds, the cuckoo calling ku hu, ku hu, coming out of their nests and chirping, and the roosters heralding daylight. My mother pulled at my sheet, saying it was dawn, 'Get up.'

In the eastern room of our house, two looms stood apart, facing each other. Two of my brothers wove at the looms. There was a bench in the big hall where elders sat, and beside it, a hearth. Behind this was the kitchen and on its western side was the puja room. Rice and lentils were stored here, so no one but my mother was allowed to enter. If my mother had a few paise, she would hide it in this room. Ours was a hand-to-mouth existence, sorrow dogging our lives till death.

The kitchen was but a bare space. Steps in front of it led to the roof. Beneath the steps were the nesting places of the hens. Close by was a grinding stone made of a huge rock. At a distance was a small thatched hut where the buffaloes were tied. Close by was the rear door which led to the street. And then a lot of bare space. The rest of the space on this western side

7 Beautiful woman

8 The ring of the wheel makes a whirring sound while turning

9 Name of a raga

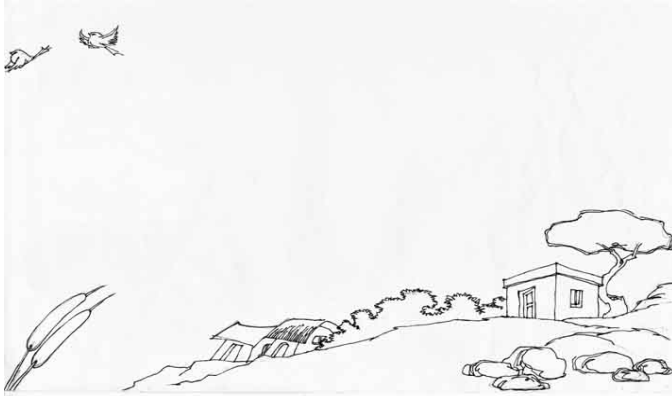
10 Ravana was known to be a devotee of Shiva

11 indicating that a beautiful woman can cause much harm

of the house was filled with firewood and a heap of dried manure pats. The neighbour's neem tree shaded where mother worked during summer. In those days, walls were built with red mud and white lines with lime paste were drawn on them. Drawn with the feather of a hen, these were beautiful. My sisters-in-law sprinkled a cowdung and water mix and spread this on the floor, giving it a smooth shine. Doors and windows were painted red.

Happiness can be had for just a paisa

Because kumkum (costing almost nothing) heralds a festival



My grandfather had two brothers.¹² Because he was the eldest and fulfilled family responsibilities like the weddings of his sisters, the care of the aged, house repairs, etc. we were poor. We called the children of his second brother 'middle fellows' and the children of the youngest brother, 'younger fellows'. My own grandfather Papaiah had four sons. My father Pedda Narsaiah was the eldest followed by Chinna Narsaiah, Chandraiah and Venkaiah. Chandraiah left the village and went away to Mangalagiri. The others stayed together.

Two families built their houses on rocky ground. They were called Bandameedi people,¹³ those living on the lower incline were called the Bandakinda¹⁴ people. The family that had a tamarind tree in front of their house we called the Chettukinda people.¹⁵

In our village, there were 30 Padmashali¹⁶ caste households where everyone wove, and lived in a bazaar¹⁷, the Saalolla bazaar, the bazaar of the weavers. In between, were two houses of Goundlas, the toddy tappers, two houses of the Reddys,¹⁸ but the rest were all those of weavers.

¹² In the Telugu book, the author writes that he had three grandfathers. Extended lineage in rural-based Telugu families are so strong that there are several grandfathers, grandmothers, and all cousins, whether removed twice, thrice or more, are termed brothers and sisters.

¹³ People living on top of a rock

¹⁴ People living below the rock

¹⁵ those living beneath the tree

¹⁶ Caste of weavers

¹⁷ A marketplace or often, a public street or group of streets

¹⁸ An agricultural upper caste community, largely in Telangana and Rayalaseema; they can be compared to the Jats of North India in terms of ownership of land, control of village power, and over the decades after Independence, control of state power

We visited each other's houses on weddings and on auspicious and inauspicious occasions. If there was a wedding in any house, there was excitement for two or three days. There was plenty of give and take among the households and we lived together harmoniously.

We were four brothers, Venkatagiri, Satyam, Viswanathan and myself. As I was born on Krishnashtami,¹⁹ I was called Krishnudu. I was told that till I was a year old, it was my eldest sister-in-law who looked after me. When I had to go to school, my date of birth was given as 14 June 1940.

All my three brothers were weavers. They were just about literate, as was my father. By the time I was aware of my surroundings, my second brother Satyam had separated from us and set up house independently.

My mother's name was Ramulamma; the villagers called her Ramakka. She was fair, slender and to my eyes, beautiful. Bracelets on her ankles, rings on her ears and a stud on her nose, she had no other ornaments. She had a silver waistband which she stored safely only to wear at weddings and functions. She would chew betel leaves, adding kasu,²⁰ lime and tobacco to it. There was a small cloth bag at her waist which held these items.



It was women's work to wrap the yarn around the spindles. Men, women and children, all worked together. In weavers' households, everyone worked. From the little one to the old man who would die soon, each had his share of work. The loom runs only if everyone works. There was work at all times, weaving dhotis²¹, silk clothes and saris for weddings and functions of the Reddy clan. However hard we worked, we made no profits. We worked with thread for zari saris and white dhotis. Two people were needed to work thread. If my brother caught one end, my sister in law caught the other. Sometimes I too worked. While we wove, we sang to lessen the tedium.

19 Krishnashtami is celebrated as the birthday of Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu

20 Catechu, an astringent substance obtained from the plant *Acacia catechu*

21 Unstitched cloth worn as a lower garment by men

*There is a forest no one can see
a ditch full of water without rain
Oh, Yaganti Linga!²²
There are sparks of fire that never die.*

*In a forest without leaves
was born an animal without a tail
from the womb of this animal
Oh, Yaganti Linga!
Was born a bird without wings.*

Yarn was available at a controlled ²³ rate at the Suryapet handloom cooperative society. My eldest brother would pack up the night's leftovers, and leave at dawn to sell the cloth woven by us so that he could buy fresh stocks of yarn, and return late at night. I would stay awake till he came, hoping and waiting for the snacks he usually brought back, and going to bed only after eating what he brought home.

It seems that my father used to dance the Bhagavatam though I have never seen him doing so. I do know that the people of my community danced the Bhagavatam. I saw my brothers doing so. To rehearse was called '*making music*.' We had to rehearse every day to be able to get every line right, to get the rhythm right.

When one sang, four sounded the chorus, and the mridangam gave the beat. Singing would go on late into the night and the entire drama was committed to memory. Rehearsals would be held as was convenient, sometimes in one house, sometimes in another. As our house was spacious, they often took place here. Dramas were always enacted during a festival.

As my father took part in the Bhagavatam, he could sing songs, poems and short pieces well. Sometimes, he would get up at night and sing Ramdas songs.

*O Rama, heir of the Ikshvaku clan, will you, even now, not respond to me?
Who will protect me if you don't?
I, who made an ornament with ten thousand semi-precious stones
in the shape of tamarind leaves for Seetha.
You are born empty-handed, you die empty-handed
Then why does desire sprout?
Your good deeds go with you
Brothers stay with you only as long as you have life
No one comes with you when you die.*

'Why is this old man singing when he should sleep!' I would think irritably. I would be very sleepy, my father the opposite. The rooster's crow soon mingled with the chorus. This would set off roosters in all the neighboring houses as well. I would cover myself with a sheet and

²² Common name for a shepherd. Folk songs often address some person by name in the refrain.

²³ Controlled rate is either a subsidized rate or a rate fixed by government

sleep without stirring. By this time, the women would already be at their work. When it rained, it did so for two to three days at a stretch. No work could take place because of the drizzle. Before the rains set in, we plugged the holes in the roof with alkaline mud. Despite this, rain would leak through gaps in the roof all over the house. We placed vessels on the floor under these leaks in the roof and when they filled up, we'd throw out the water. and put them back on the floor. This was not difficult during the day, but our nights were sleepless. It was damp everywhere. In the rain, we climbed onto the roof, filled the holes with mud and stamped it firmly in place. When it rained we did not run the looms.

Our village had three ponds, Aavucheruvu, Patemma cheruvu and Mailasamudram²⁴. The first two were on a higher level than the village, the third was close by as well as lower. Water from the village drained into it, hence the name. These three ponds seemed like oceans to us when we were little. The stream going to Mailasamudram ran close to our house. A stream from a nearby hamlet, Anajipuram often used to flood this stream. Streams from lands lying downstream of Aavucheruvu and Patemma cheruvu also joined it, making it a virtual flood.

Close to our stream were banyan trees and jamun and ginne trees. When the ginne tree ripened, its black fruit fell. Even though the birds had pecked them and they were half eaten, we thought them delicious. Whoever rose earliest at dawn got them. As the stream flowed nearby and there was sand all over, we played pittagollu (²⁵with sand) under the tamarind tree.

Agricultural labourers sang pleasant songs while transplanting and weeding.

*Oh, bee²⁶! In the cotton fields of the Reddys, a scorpion stung me
Which finger did it sting?
The middle one, oh bee
tell my mother to send medicine
my mother brought medicine but the medicine hurt me even more
my uncle brought medicine but this was more painful
tell my people to bring medicine
my husband brought medicine but this hurt me even more
call home the youngster from the house opposite ours, oh bee
only he can cool me with his medicines and mantras, oh bee.*

When it rained, our stream flowed high. There was water in the stream for ten months a year. Fish swam against the tide. We had a small net at home and fished in the evening with this. When we caught fish, we washed them on the rocks and brought them home. My sister-in-law soaked tamarind, knowing we'd bring our catch. As soon as we reached home, the fish went into the cooking pot.

In the village, sour leafy greens called gongura, brinjals (eggplant/aubergine) and dried fish were sold in baskets. If it rained, we wouldn't even get these.

²⁴ Literally means dirty sea

²⁵ Pittagollu means birds' nests. We dug our feet deep into the sand and pulled them out; the holes thus made looked like birds' nests

²⁶ The bee is also synonymous with the male – the song has sexual innuendoes, the young married woman wanting the youngster opposite her house and not her husband, mother or uncle

Vinayaka chavithi, the festival of the Elephant God, was the big festival. We washed the looms in the stream and worshipped them. On festival day, we woke when it was still dark and went to the adjoining village, Pembadu, where we fetched mango leaves, uttareni, pomegranates, jaji, garveru, unmetta leaves, and wood apple from the farm of the dora (landlord) there. We did this while it was still dark and there was no one to guard the fields. We made Vinayaka (Elephant God) idols of clay and stuck two grains of rice in place to make up his eyes, though the rat looked funny with these eyes. We put up Vinayaka with the fruits and flowers we had brought. I too placed my books by Vinayaka.²⁷ The washed looms stood behind. We applied sandalwood paste and kumkuma bottus²⁸ to the looms. Payasam²⁹ was cooked as prasadam.³⁰

*Oh, potbellied Ganapati!³¹ I am your follower
Eat your fill of the undraalu³², ghee and dal,
And bless us, oh Ganapati.*

By the time the celebrations were over, it was noon. Since we were fasting, we had had nothing to eat since morning. Freshly harvested green gram was soaked, ground with spices, fried as *vadas* and placed before Vinayaka. It was meant for the God, the mouths were ours.

It was supposed to be auspicious to earn abuses during Vinayaka Chaviti; we would hurl tiny stones on asbestos roofed houses...as the stones pattered on the roofs, abuses from the house owners would fly back at us, concluding the festival. The festival was only celebrated by artisans and Komatis, but everybody hurled stones at night.

During the month of Sravan, all the people from our community gathered to picnic informally under the trees in the fields of the Reddys near our village. We brought goats, vadas and cold rotis. If the mutton curry was not sufficient, we brought roosters to curry. We went to the nearby Sayyed Abbas gudem tanda and fetched country liquor. This was prepared in the tanda³³ with jaggery and toddy. We tested the purity of the liquor by dipping a rag in the liquor and lighting a matchstick. If the match lit up with a flaring sound, it was good liquor. If it was good liquor, the cloth did not burn, only the alcohol did.

By the time rice and curry were on the boil, people pulled out sets of playing cards. As the game progressed, the bets rose by the minute. Men played cards and the women readied the meal. Elders got a bigger share and youngsters, a smaller share of liquor. This was to be put down in a single gulp and undiluted. If the liquor was good, it burned your throat. Because I was young, I got only a little. When I refused, they would say, 'Hey, this is a festival. Don't refuse liquor,' and persuaded me to drink. Along with the liquor, we had vadas and mutton pieces to munch. It was a completely relaxed day. We stayed till evening under the trees and returned home late.

All our relatives picnicked together. Sometimes, there were minor quarrels which we forgot

27 Books, musical instruments, etc. are placed near the deity as an offering and to gain his blessings.

28 Decorative spots of vermillion powder

29 Sweet pudding made with milk and rice/semolina/sago/lentils/etc.

30 food offered to God and later distributed among devotees

31 The same as Vinayaka

32 Rice flour ground with spices or with jaggery and steamed with flour

33 Lambada habitation

the next morning. After Shravan Punnami³⁴, we had another picnic with all the villagers. This picnic was the same as the earlier one. For every picnic someone had, we had two.

Even if Krishnashtami was not a big festival, we would drive in two big sticks to the ground in the open space in front of the lone Anjaneyaswami³⁵ temple. We brought slush from the pond and spread this in front of the temple. Children came with small sticks and tried to hit the utti³⁶. They would slip, tumble and invariably fall to be covered with mud. Spectators roared with laughter. Small children wore only a loincloth, and older children knickers, but no upper cloth.

After this display, those learning kolattam³⁷ would come along and show off their skills, singing as they jumped and circled, swinging their sticks.

*Oh, you dark fellow with the horizontal caste marks³⁸
 You are the god of our house, Oh Govinda
 Krishnamurthi, you are the god of the Gollas³⁹
 why have you come here?
 Oh, Golla Bhama⁴⁰, I have come to buy milk
 Give me good milk, oh Golla Bhama.*

A teacher taught the villagers kolattam, staying on the village for two or three months. People worked all day in the fields, returned home, ate dinner and practiced kolattam late into the night. Among the different forms of kolattam, the most difficult was jada kolattam. People learnt kolattam till they achieved this. The speciality of this kolattam was that dancers braided and unbraided themselves. Women and children enjoyed the display, and watched while the men performed.

*I asked you to go to the woods and fetch wood
 Oh Bhama! How come your tresses are braided with flowers?*

*The wind blew, there was sudden darkness
 the branch shook and the flowers fell on me
 I promise you – I vow on myself, on my father, my mother and you.*

*This is fine, but who is the man under your bed, Oh Bhama?
 Who is the man, Oh Bhama?*

*It is the youngster from the house next door
 His cat has a headache and he wanted bedbugs for it
 I promise you there is no dalliance*

³⁴ The day of the full moon in Shravana, the fifth month in the Hindu calendar

³⁵ Hanuman

³⁶ The mud pot, hung high on a rope between the two sticks.

³⁷ A dance with thin sticks

³⁸ The sect which uses the horizontal caste marks are the Vaishnavites, worshipping Vishnu, and this reference is to an incarnation of Vishnu, Krishna

³⁹ Gollas are a caste who rear goats, sheep and cows

⁴⁰ Satyabhama who also belonged to the Golla caste

I vow on myself, on my father, my mother and you.

We sang like this and played kolattam late in the night. Kolattam was particularly enjoyable on moonlit nights.

Relatives descended all of a sudden like stars falling from the sky. Certain courtesies were traditionally extended to them. My father took the guests to the Pedda cheruvu (the big tank) in the evening for toddy. Since I was small, he would take me along. We carried snacks and fried gram from home, the elders drank toddy and talked; they brought back toddy in a lotti for the family too and each person got two kanchulu.⁴¹ Our village was known for its superior toddy. Relatives who stayed with us for four to five days joined us in working the looms. We were never inconvenienced by them. My father never stinted on courtesies. To cut a chicken for a guest was a must. We reared chicken and all we had to do was to catch a rooster and slit its neck. My mother chopped it into small pieces, marinated the meat with spices, and made good curry with plenty of gravy, making sure there was enough for the whole family. If anyone had a cold, it disappeared with the spicy quality of the chicken curry, its aroma reaching even the neighbours. The chicken curry was indeed formidable. When we went to the houses of our relatives, similar courtesies were shown to us there. There would be singing, talking and laughter... and thus the day would pass.

One needed a song to forget the fatigue of the loom. The song was part of the work.

*I wore a sari with patterns on it
I went to Bhuvanagiri
I placed a pot on a pot
I went to Kakinada
The Boya in Bhuvanagiri
The Kapu in Kakinada
Oh, uncle Nandagiri Rangaiah
He put my pots down and flirted with me.*

My maternal grandmother stayed half the year in our house. My mother was the eldest of her three daughters. While the second daughter's household was not very prosperous, and the third had died a long while ago, our household ran smoothly. My grandmother was busy doing some work or the other, and she was never idle. She stitched quilts with old rags. We were warm and cozy with these when we slept on top of a mat and an old saree as a cover. The saris were thick, they smelt pleasantly as the washerman had washed them with alkaline mud⁴² over boiling vats. There were only one or two cots for only the very old slept on them, and even those things were cots only in name as they were rickety and worn down. My mother and I slept on a mat.

My maternal grandmother's village was Mamidala and there was no way but to cross the Musi river to reach it. We crossed the river near Anajipuram. During summer, there were only two or three streams in the Musi. During other seasons, it flowed full. Even if the river was waist deep, two or three people formed a human chain and crossed it, carefully taking the path where the river ran shallow. During the rains, the river was full of trees and branches swept

⁴¹ Toddy has a variety of traditional measures – the muntha, buddi, lotti, kanchulu (earthen drinking glass) binki and lotti.

⁴² Alkaline soils were white; the top layer of this was used as soap to clean clothes

along in its tide and it was difficult to cross it at that time.

We took packed food with us which we opened by the banks of the river, where we ate and rested before we moved. The packed food was white rice and some mango pickle. As the oil of the pickle spread to the rice,⁴³ the rice turned the colour of the red hibiscus, and the food was very tasty.

*`If the belly is full, one can tackle a Nawab.'*⁴⁴

The exhaustion of walking for long hours melted in the cool breeze on the banks of the river.

It would be dark by the time we reached my grandmother's village. The sahuks (traders, shopkeepers and moneylenders) here were rich and had big houses with frontages used as shops. Puffed lentils, puffed rice and candy in different shapes were available here. My grandmother stayed alone in a two-roomed house; from outside, this looked like a block of chalk with no windows. In those days, fearing thieves, people lived in windowless houses. There were the tiniest of windows, and the rooms were airless. We stayed on with some difficulty for two days and returned.

Flies multiplied during the month of Shravan. All round the house were dung heaps of hay, so we cholera was a real possibility and threat. Young children frequently suffered from vomiting and diarrhea. Small pox scarred many people. If Ammavaru, the mother⁴⁵ visited, we were smeared with a paste of ground neem leaves and given toddy to drink, as it was believed to cool the body. There was no doctor in the village even for minor ailments, though we had two fakirs, Peddarajulu and Chinnarajulu from neighbouring Dosapadu. If one slept for two or three days, it would annoy the fever enough for it to subside, they said. The fakirs ground up some medicine and gave these as small tablets, and got something in kind in return. My brother prepared taveez⁴⁶ for children who got fits or who were in a state of shock and adults who had chronic diseases. Customers bought the mantra⁴⁷ at a paisa and some incense, my brother scrawled something illegible on a small piece of paper, rolled this up, tied it with a string, and gave it to the supplicant, telling him it was a yantram.⁴⁸ They took this home, daubed turmeric and incense on it, and fastened it on the suffering child. All this was based on faith. My brother gave me the money he received for yantras.

During the month of Shravan, the entire village celebrated the Mutyalamma Goddess festival with bonalu.⁴⁹ It was proclaimed through drum beats that the bonalu was to be taken out on a particular day. Those who had vowed that they would sacrifice a chicken or gift a new sari to the goddess would be prepared with their offerings. It was the day of the potters. In the evening, young wives wore new saris and got ready to carry their pots in the procession. They chanted, 'Ammam bail.' Leading the procession were the drums, big and small. Along with the women carrying their bonalu were those who had promised a chicken to the goddess; they carried the animal or bird. Little children wove in and out of the crowd excitedly, and the

43 Rice was tied in a cloth, pickle put in its centre. When the cloth was opened, the colour of the pickle was seen to have spread out into the rice in such a way that it looked like a flower.

44 An Indian Muslim noble

45 Small pox and chicken pox were often referred to as 'the mother'. The mother goddess was supposed to bring these diseases.

46 amulets

47 chants

48 amulet

49 Women carry decorated pots decked with neem leaves and filled with rice cooked with nine varieties of lentils and spices

procession slowly wended its way to the Mutyalamma temple near the big landlord's house. The trance-struck woman held neem branches and swayed, mumbling unintelligible things. Not everyone understood what she was saying.

`Don't trance till your sari falls off,'⁵⁰



*`I am Mutyalamma; don't look upon me with disdain.
Celebrate the festival well.'*

It was usually women of the lower castes who tranced. Upper-caste women did not participate in the procession and never went into a trance. After they reached the Mutyalamma temple, the Kurmas⁵¹ decorated the stone that was called the goddess, with turmeric and kumkum. Sticks of incense were lit. Those who had vowed to sacrifice a chicken slaughtered it there and tied a head or a leg to the branch of a tree. After the sacrificial hen was cooked and eaten, the festival ended.



We had a buffalo. The boy who grazed cattle took our buffalo too for grazing. He was somewhat lame and grazed cattle since he could do no other work. He was known as Jangili Venkulu. After daybreak, he would take our buffalo to the poramboke (government grazing lands) near Kashtalagadda to graze it there. Venkulu had a bamboo staff in the middle of

⁵⁰ Don't overdo it.

⁵¹ The caste which rears sheep

which he had made a hole, and played it like a flute. He loved playing it, breathing in with all his might. He pushed the buffaloes this way and that, and took them to the pond for water. After some time, he pushed them all into one group and at twilight, brought them back to the village. Each buffalo went to its own house. Those who did not farm kept buffaloes for milk. They sent these out with Venkulu. He was given something every month for grazing, and was called the jangli barلودu, the boy who took the cattle to the forest to graze.

We fed our buffalo grass or hay and it gave a good quantity of milk. During the rainy season, my sister-in-law went at dawn to the fields of people we knew to fetch grass. She went early because the ground was wet with dew, and it was easy to pull out the grass. It was late in the morning when she returned home, carrying bundles of grass. Sometimes I went with her too. In the summer, when it was difficult to get grass, we dug grass with a small spade from the edge of the tank and brought it home.

If the milk was placed on a fire lit with cowdung cakes,⁵² it boiled very slowly, but never boiled over. Milk was curdled in pots hung from the ceiling to keep cats away. Sometimes, when my mother wasn't looking, I ate the cream that formed on top of the curds. It was delicious. As thick curds were never sufficient for the whole family, it was all made into buttermilk. Neighbours who had no milk-yielding cattle brought us kudthi⁵³ in return for buttermilk. My mother removed all the cream and made butter once a week. Ghee from the butter was used for festivals and other happy occasions. My mother raised a cat to get rid of rats. The cat was always between her feet as soon as the buffalo was milked. After a little milk was poured for it in an earthen vessel, it drank this and went away. It behaved in a similar fashion when we were ready to eat. If we gave it a morsel of rice mixed with buttermilk, it would eat this and sit by, letting out plaintive meows till we gave it another morsel. We had no rats at home because of the cat. When we cooked fish, the cat feasted.

The sweet water well was near the house of the Big patel. This was a big and a very deep well. Four motas⁵⁴ (manual irrigation system with ropes and oxen) were tied to it to irrigate the fields nearby. Perhaps there had been steps to climb down this well at one time. These had worn down and a crooked path was later cut out. Villagers went down to the well, dipped their pots and climbed up very slowly. Except for the Madigagudem (the hamlet of one sect of Scheduled Castes), everyone in the village drew water from this well. It was full of moss and small fish darted about in its depth. Because this was a well one climbed down into, whoever drank its water got hookworm. These worms went into the stomach and created the kind of sores that spread all over, never healed and caused much misery.

Not every house had a drinking water well. Water was brought in mud pots and there was a shortage of water. Whoever went to fetch water was soon deep in conversation with others at the well. The dawn conversations delayed work, the night conversations delayed sleep. My uncle had a sweet water well in his house. There was only a wall between our houses which, for some time, was broken deliberately so we could fetch water. When the womenfolk began quarrelling, the wall was rebuilt, blocking our access to the well. After that, we went around the house to collect water. This well had no motu. There were two tall stone pillars, a rope was

⁵² Cowdung gives slow heat and not flames

⁵³ A mixture of the water left after washing the rice and boiling the rice, mixed with vegetable peel and other kitchen waste., stored in a pot to give to cattle."

⁵⁴ Water wheel

tied in between the two pillars, on which was tied a small mud pot you could use to dip and draw up water. Sometimes, the pot hit a rock and broke. The well was full of broken pot shards. One had to dig the well deeper to get water. Sometimes, when women drew water, their feet slipped and they fell into the water, and somebody had to climb in and pull them out. Half the water poured into the pot usually fell to the ground and was wasted. This became a stream and the bazaar was a swamp because of this. All the people from my area drank this water.

Ten days before Holi⁵⁵, I rounded up the village children to play kolattam. We sang songs and wandered through, one bazaar at a time, every evening. Some people gave us paddy, some cereals like maize and millets. Some women scolded us and chased us away and some others asked us to return on the last day. We sold the grain to the local Komati⁵⁶ and bought jaggery, puffed gram to munch. On the day of the full moon, we set fire to Kama's effigy and ended the festival. Some Sudras and Madigas formed a team of eight and danced around in a group, clapping all the while. Holi was not, at that time, a festival of colours. Here is a humorous song.

*Oh trader, oh trader,
if you give me two annas, I will run, I will run
if you give me four annas, I will sing, I will sing
if you give me eight annas, it is well
if you give me one rupee, there is some meaning to it
if you give me two rupees, I can eat, I can eat
if you give me three, I will be happy
if you give me four, I will be joyous
if you give me five, it will be useful
if you give me six, I can repay my debts
if you give me seven, I will come to you the day after
if you give me eight, I will follow you
if you give me nine, I will come to the garden (with you)
if you give me ten, I will be near you
if you give me twenty, I will come to your house
Oh trader, if you give me thirty, I will kill my husband and be yours forever.*

We had no temple for Rama in the village, there being only one, which was for Anjaneyulu.⁵⁷ It was a round structure with an iron grill for a door. During festivals and celebrations, people came here to worship. During Sri Rama Navami⁵⁸, my father became a virtual dictator. He bathed early in the morning, went to the Komati's house to get jaggery and Bengal gram, brought water in pots from Dombavi, cleaned the Anjaneyulu temple and conducted puja with incense and fire. Girls from neighbouring houses cleaned the open space in front of the temple, sprinkled water on it to settle the dust and drew rangoli⁵⁹ patterns.

⁵⁵ also called Kamuni Punnami, signifying the full moon of Kama, the god of love

⁵⁶ trader

⁵⁷ Another name for Hanuman, Rama's greatest devotee

⁵⁸ The birthday of Rama, the seventh avatar of Vishnu

⁵⁹ The art of drawing geometric designs in coloured rice flour on the threshold of Hindu homes. The patterns represent the grand design of the universe.

My father added jaggery to the pot and soaked the Bengal gram in it. By this time, it was evening. Rama's wedding was a festival for the whole village. The patellu and Komatlu placed incense, camphor and coconut in front of the deity. My father made a snack of the dal, jaggery and pieces of coconut. Devotees circambulated the temple and received the snack as prasadam, a consecrated offering, jostling each other for a share. 'For me, for me,' was the constant refrain, children being the biggest culprits.

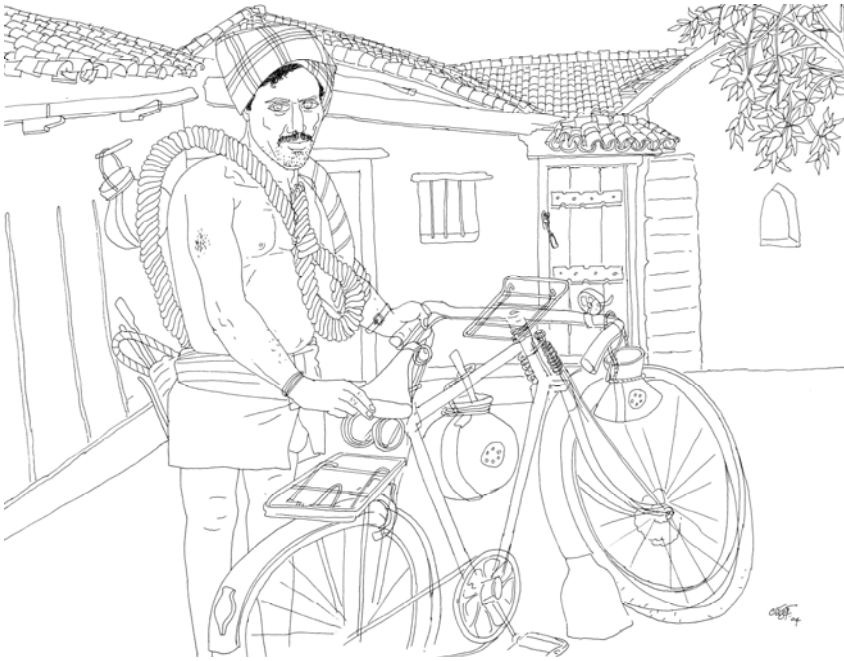
At this time, those learning chakkabhajans sang songs, going around the temple and taking out a torchlight procession. When this stopped before the houses of village elders, the housewife carried a lighted lamp and camphor outside to the group, took arati, poured water to clean the place, and broke a coconut.

*Oh, Rama, oh Kodandarama
Our Rama comes, let us sing his praise
We will never forget the name of Rama
We will never forget Siddamuni
We are your followers, you are our support
Thayyaku dittim tha! Thayyaku dittim tha!*

This song was sung as we went around the village, singing and dancing. The whole village danced, stopped at the houses of elders and went back to the temple. It could be very late by this time, when at last, Father broke his fast, ate the gram snack and drank the jaggery water.

In summer, we had holidays. Ponds and tanks dried up, and the harvest would be over. People of the Muttharasi community took the tank on lease for fish and sold the fish they caught, completing it all in a week. They then left the remaining fish for the village. Saying 'the tank is ours,' villagers gathered with nets and swooped on the tank to catch the remaining fish. The whole village was in motion. Along with elders, children too got into the swamp of the pond and searched for fish. 'Even blind stork catch murrel,' is the saying. Sometimes even fairly big murrel were caught. By noon, both because of the rising heat and continuous stamping of feet, the fish rose to the muddy surface. Then we beat them with small sticks and caught them. The mud of the tank coated us and dried into sheets in the heat. Yet, we did not care and continued to fish. The tank was full of villagers – a lot of commotion. For a week, every house in the village had fish curry every day. What fish was left over was salted and sun dried. After the harvests, the fields did not need to be watered. We tied dried castor stalks to our waists and learnt to swim in the mota wells that ringed the village. Those who could swim stood on the banks of the well, pushing people in, one by one, and we splashed, dived, surfaced and shouted, pushing each other.

Sometimes we dug out earthworms from the soil, stuck them on rods and went fishing in the wells; there were fish in the well near the tank, all kinds of fish – usika dontulu, burrada mattalu, jellalu.. When we cast the net in the well and sat waiting, we did not know the time of day. The concentration was on the rod (dried jowar stalk, thermocol). Sometimes, if a big fish swallowed the worm and plunged into the depths of the well, the thread and rod snapped, and the fish escaped. Some fish nibbled at the worm and these thieving fish too escaped. Once the rod caught many buradamattalu. The Goundla nearby said that he would pour us toddy if we gave him the fish. We kept two, gave him the rest and drank toddy. We roasted the two fish. We were quite drunk then, yet reached home somehow. Where there were holidays, we never remained at home, we were always at song and play.



Annaram, the village near ours, had plenty of toddy palm trees and toddy there was cheap. After Holi, we used to get toddy for two months. By evening, those habituated to toddy carried their little pots and walked towards Annaram. By that time, Goundla Karingula Biksham was ready with toddy under the toddy tree. As soon as one went there, he poured two kanchulu of toddy free. If he was not under the tree, I went running to where I heard this folk song:

*Get off the bed, oh Panchala!
Oh, little bird, get off the bed
oh, bird of five colours, get off the bed
Lift your bowed head
But look with a modest countenance
Get off the bed, oh Panchala!
Oh, little bird, get off the bed*

I would sit for some time, then twist my cloth round and round, put it on my head, fill up my toddy pot and when it was dark, walk home with my friends. The toddy was covered and allowed to cool before everyone in the household had two kanchullu⁶⁰. They ate, talked a bit

⁶⁰ Small pots, often personal

and settled down for the night, either outside or on the terrace.

In summer, both with the cool night breeze and the toddy, one lost consciousness. Before summer was over, our Goundla gave us toddy fruit twice or thrice. These were delicious and cooled the body. When summer was coming to a close, it was time for toddy fruits. We got up before daybreak, went to the tank and searched for the toddy fruits that had fallen beneath the trees. The fruit of some trees was very sweet. We knew well which these were. After these fruit were buried in the earth and taken out later, we sucked them; they were very tasty. If we buried the fruits of the toddy tree in the mud, they dried into gegulu⁶¹ by Sankranti.⁶² When dug out, the gegulu were tasty. These were our snacks.

There were many palm trees on the banks of the big tank. In the evening, when adults completed their work, they went to these trees. Some were regulars. They knew at what time the Goundla tapped which particular tree. They reached exactly at that time, and sweetly calling the Goundla by his name, circled him. When they called him, he called back from atop the tree. He poured good toddy for the regulars. Those who drank regularly knew which tree yielded good toddy. Some drank till the lotti⁶³ was empty. As they drank, they shared their sorrows and happiness, discussed village issues and walked slowly, singing, reaching home slowly by dusk. They did this every day till the toddy season was over.

My aunt (mother's younger sister) was married to a man in Annaram. He, my uncle, wove at the loom. There was a tamarind tree in front of their house, and he was called Chintakindi Venkaiah. During the summer holidays, all of us children went to the houses of our relatives. When I said that I would go to my aunt's house, my mother agreed. At that time, the tank in their village had had its fish cleared out, and all the villagers were in it. I went along with my cousin to the tank. When I climbed into it, I took off my shirt and kept it on the edge of the tank. We caught plenty of fish in the water on that hot day. When we stepped out, my shirt had disappeared. As much as we searched, we couldn't find it, and returned home without it. I remained there one more day and returned home without a shirt. As my aunt was poor, she could not get me another shirt.

‘The whole street is one of beggars, who will give you alms?’

My father and brothers smoked chuttalu (tobacco wrapped in moduga leaves). To roll the chutta, one needed the leaf of the moduga tree found in plenty in summertime. These trees grew thickly in the wastelands of the patel. We went at dawn, picked good leaves, stuffed them into a sack and brought it all home. Some leaves were stitched into plates, others were strung on ropes and hung from the rafters. Every day, some leaves were taken out, soaked and when placed under something heavy, gradually softened. These were excellent for rolling chutta. Wayfarers going to their fields stopped by our house; they knew that we had a stock of chutta leaves. They rolled their chuttas here and left saying that their tobacco was good, and gave us some of it. Thus both sides were happy.

Anajipuram, the village near ours, had black soil where cotton and tobacco grew well. Sometimes, people came by selling tobacco tied up in sacks and carried on their heads. The

⁶¹ Dried fruit, also very popular in Andhra Pradesh, the fruit ripens in the summer, it is buried and dug out in Sankranti, nine months later.

⁶² The harvest festival in Andhra Pradesh, when the kharif crop is harvested and also marks the beginning of warmer and longer days compared to nights.

⁶³ The big pot

quality of tobacco was determined by its aroma and strength. People smoked chutta to pass time. The smoke was inhaled, it was skimmed and let off. It came in handy to help ease the hard work. It was also exchanged as a gesture of courtesy.

Every Friday⁶⁴ was a holiday. That day was reserved for thieving. We went in search for the fields which had groundnut and pesara and the areas where berry (regi) trees abounded.

There was a week's holiday for peerla panduga⁶⁵ The peer was placed in the village square. It did not matter whether you were Hindu or Muslim. There was fire-pit dug for the purpose. People threw logs into it to keep the fire alive. As soon as it was dark, we cried out, `Asodullah – adi sahi dula'⁶⁶ and danced around the fire till very late. During the peerla panduga, our work was to trail the peerlu. We carried the savaar, held the korada and went from house to house. Everyone participated, chiefly the Sudras⁶⁷. On the day the peer was to be immersed in the well, it was taken around the village. If stopped before a house, water was poured with respect, copra, jaggery and incense was given. That day, some people even wore fancy costumes and went from house to house begging. There was a festive atmosphere in the whole village.

Asoi – ade sahi
Dula – ide sahi.

There was a man called Kunti Ramulu. He had studied a little. He taught the alphabet to children nearby. This was a private school. He taught the medieval epic poems by rote. He did not allow anyone to move till they got their letters right, and a stick danced in his hand. That is how we learnt our alphabet. A week before Dasara, he sent children from house to house with paper flags.

We will not take four annas
We will not ask for eight annas
If you give us three rupees, we will not touch them.
The teacher is satisfied with five rupees,
Children are satisfied with gram and jaggery.

We chanted shrirastu shubhamastu⁶⁸ and stood before each house, begging till they gave us four annas or whatever they could. This money was for the teacher. We did not have classes that week.

When the festival of batukamma⁶⁹ approached, people called their daughters and sisters home. Houses were cleaned, rangoli done, and the batukamma was built up. Earlier, gunugu flowers were brought, dyed in different colours and stored. Flour and tangedu flowers were used to worship the batukamma and this was arranged in the evening, either near the *gadi*⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Under the Nizam's rule, Friday being a special day for Muslims, was a holiday.

⁶⁵ Moharrum

⁶⁶ That is all right, this too is alright

⁶⁷ Everyone except the Scheduled Castes, the Brahmins and the Muslims

⁶⁸ God bless you

⁶⁹ Batukamma refers to plates piled and decorated with different kinds of layered flowers. Women celebrate this festival for the well-being of their men. They worship the batukamma, dance in groups and finally, slide the flowers into a village pond.

⁷⁰ The high fortresses in which the Telangana zamindars lived

of the dora or the Mutyalamma temple. That day, women wore the new clothes they had kept away safely, the wives and children of sahuks and patels wore white zari silk saris and stepped out. After everyone came, the batukamma was placed in the centre, and girls and young wives danced around it, clapping and singing.

Batukamma batukamma uyyallo (a refrain, often sang in lullabies)

My vows were fulfilled, uyyallo

Your vows too were fulfilled, uyyallo

what vegetables and nuts do you want, Gouramma goddess

what fruits do you want, oh Gouramma

do you want a pumpkin, oh Gouramma

or shall I get a pumpkin flower, oh Gouramma

You may go Gouramma,

but when will you return Gouramma?

Children like me were terribly excited.

A teacher had come to our Government school which had a tiled roof and stood in the big cowshed of the patel. There were four rooms, each leading into the next. We were afraid of school. The chaprasi went from house to house, a stick dancing in his hands, to make sure we attended school, and threatened children who avoided school. We were terrified when we heard that the chaprasi was approaching. When elders wanted to frighten children, they said, 'There, therethe chaprasi comes.' We wet our pants at night if we had nightmares about the approaching chaprasi.

We had wooden slates which if rubbed with the ash of dosa leaves, turned black. I wrote my alphabets on this, and numbers and letters on sand. The teacher asked us to stand up and recite our tables.

There were sada bahar trees in the school with red and white flowers always on them. As soon as school was over, all of us tumbled out at once, shouting and yelling, as we ran back home. Walking was rare! As we ran and fell against stones, bruised knees were common. These healed with turmeric.

Children who stubbornly refused to go to school were bribed with roasted broken rice and fried green gram poured into their pockets. They could be seen talking to their friends and munching as they walked along. Children always had sores caused by scabies, which because they spread from one to the other, never healed entirely .

As soon as the holidays arrived, we went to the stream, collected pebbles, shaped them into marbles and played with them. Sighting from afar, striking the marbles, hitting these into holes, sending them flying into holes, hitting them so hard they scattered – these were our games. A small stick was stuck into a depression in the ground. You hit one end with a larger stick, making the small stick fly up and fall far away, and we caught the before it hit the ground. This was gilli danda.

The sadhana shurulu, a community which begs from the padmashalis, came to our village twice or thrice a year. They formed teams. In the day, they made arrangements for a performance in front of the dora's gadi. The team leader wore a white dhoti with a length of red cloth tied about his waist, while in his right hand, he gripped a sprig from a neem tree,

over which mantras were chanted.

The comedian wore a ragged topi, which immediately made us laugh. Trousers and shirt made up of red, yellow and white cloth, and stick in his hand. The others wore plain dhotis and vests. All had vertical marks on their foreheads and wore no slippers. Before the performance, they sounded two very loud nagaras. Everyone in the village now knew that the show had begun. The performers brought all their materials to the dais which they placed with a drawn circle, warning everyone not to step into the marked area. The puja began; smoke from the incense was thick; the nagaras sounded; the leader recited mantras, waved his neem branch, pulled and scattered some leaves, sprinkling turmeric water from a jug in all directions. The air was fraught with terror for children like me. First was a show with sticks. Since they practised with sticks, they were called sadhana shurulu (practised warriors.)

The patel called for a paper which was rolled up, tied with thread and thrown into the flames. When the flames died down, he pulled the paper out. Chanting mantras all the while, he sprinkled water on it, and in full view of everyone, took out the paper with the thread still tied on it. They sat a man on a palanquin made of dried jowar stalks. They brought him a huge rock which even four men could not lift, placed it on the chest of the leader and smashed the rock to pieces with a big sledgehammer. As everyone watched, a man went into a tent made of cloth and disappeared; the same man appeared from within the crowd. Another man tied to one of four pillars appeared from the other three simultaneously. An idol of a deity emerged from the tent, along with naivedyam and pulihora. Though it was faked, onlookers felt as if God had really appeared.



'The finger makes three piles, but there is nothing.'

Their show was awesome. They stayed with the Padmashalis and bought their food for two or three days. The Bhagavatham troupe staged about two dramas. Among these, I recall the Ramachandram mela very well. Bala Nagamme, Alli Rani, Babhruvahana, Kambhoja Raju,

etc, were staged with a gap of one day. The dramatists went to the houses of patellu as well as that of the middle classes and asked for a loan of saris to wear on stage. They returned these the next day. We thought it prestigious to lend saris to the dramatists. They borrowed benches and cots from villagers and made this the stage with curtains on three sides. The drama began at 10 in the night. After dinner, I took an old piece of sacking and went along with my mother; everyone brought a mat or sack to sit on.

Village elders sat in the first row on benches or cots. The drama began after the patel and patwari reached the place. On both sides of the stage, men stood, holding torches. Castor oil was poured into these and the drama was staged. It began with Balakrishna; after he left, the drama started. The comedian entered and greeted the village elders by name, one after the other. Then the king entered. On his head a big crown, on his wrists bracelets, a big knife in his hands, his coloured clothes shimmering in the light of the lamps, and behind him, a long curtain.

The chorus sounded the beat. As the king jumped and danced on the wooden stage made up with cots placed together, he pounded out an impressive boom-boom thumping rhythm. After the commotion of the king, the queen entered. Before she did, two men held up a fine cloth to screen her from view. Then to the refrain of ` *Oh, sweet queen,*' she entered. The comedian called out, ` *Oh lady! Tell us about yourself.*' At this, songsters started singing about the queen and the stage curtains opened slowly. The drama began in this fashion. In between the real play, from time to time, the comedian and Bangarakka entered and made us laugh with crude jokes.

Hear a verse of one of the songs.

*Come to my house
Rise in the morning and return to your house
You think that I am dark, you may not like me
Plough black soil and see if white jowar does not sprout
You think I am short, you think we may not match
Don't short oxen plough the red soil better?*

Youngsters were in splits with songs like this. There was no question of sleep.

*Why worry, I am like the moon
Oh sweet brother-in-law, we never get the time to meet, what can we do?
I sold a bird and bought a special four-poster bed
Even this is not enough for us
Our passion so great
The bed broke into two.*

The drama lasted till dawn. At the end, they sang the mangalaharati. During the harati, if the

spectators gave a few annas, that was good fortune for the artists.

Girls were drawn to the artistes playing roles. One woman was attracted to the man playing the role of king. She sent word through her farmhand, '*After the drama, come to me in the same dress. I will be near the cattleshed*'. Of course, he could not go to her with his crown. Yet she sent the same message every time the drama was enacted. Seeing that it could not be avoided, one day, the artiste playing the king, went in full stage dress with the farmhand, but covered with a sheet. At the cattleshed, her rajabhogam (royal pleasure with the king) was certainly consummated, but in the morning, her face was coated with colours.

Men played the role of women too. The artistes stayed outside the village in a hut. When we went to the hut to see the man who played the role of king, we saw him in torn clothes.

*Whatever disguises you wear is only for food.
However many years you live, one day you will surely die.*

In the morning, they took their nets and went fishing. In the evening, they looked for toddy. There were incessant quarrels during their stay. They were very happy during the night of the full moon. They stayed a month, and went to a village nearby. Children who saw the drama made paper crowns and bracelets, shaped toddy stalks into knives and danced with these.

Sattenna was beyond argument, the handsomest in our family. He resembled our mother. He played the part of Rajesham in the Bhagavatham and every young girl in the village was after him. One night, he eloped with a married woman of a different caste, causing a commotion in the village. People from her community entered our house aggressively, and father and her relatives set out to search many villages for the couple. Finally, they were caught on the outskirts of Khammam. The girl was sent home, we paid due penalty in the ensuing panchayat, and the panchayat concluded with everyone eating and drinking liquor and returning to their houses. Such incidents were common. After a period of time, our lives carried on as if nothing had happened.

*She is not completely a whore
But she doesn't return home till dawn.*

The younger of my elder brothers and four or five of my paternal uncle's sons came together with a plan. However long we wove at our looms, we did not prosper; so they thought they would if they became sanyasis. They left one night, taking an ektara⁷¹ made out of a dried bottle gourd and clothes dipped in saffron dye without telling anyone. When we woke in the morning and discovered their absence, we came to know that they had become sanyasis. My elder brother along with two others, left for Khammam, because they knew that Khammam was the nearest town connected by rail, and the absconding youngsters might have gone there. They found them in the garb of sanyasis at the Khammam railway station. The youngsters who were getting ready to enter a train were brought back home. Their plan was – sanyasis might not be asked for tickets on a train, and people give them alms, so they would not starve. All those who did not work usually joined a band of sanyasis. When they were brought back and asked why they had gone, they said they wanted to go around and look at the country.

71 Single stringed musical instrument common in villages. Ek=one, tara= string.

Thinking that if they married him off, he would not stop roaming about, the elders began looking out for a match for the younger of my brothers. Was there any dearth of unmarried girls? No! One of our cousins had a daughter, but she was slightly young. How long would it take her to mature? My mother went to Mamidala and fixed the match. Weddings were celebrated in the bride's house. We left with the wedding band in three or four bullock carts, stopped at the Musi river, took a nap, and reached Mamidala by dawn. Since it was cooler to travel by night, we ate dinner at home before setting off. Women and small children sat in the carts. Men, the wedding band and drummers walked the distance. The practice was to look for matrimonial alliances only in neighbouring villages, making it easy for relatives to gather for occasions, both auspicious and inauspicious.



Ten days before the wedding, paddy was dehusked and chilli powdered. Weddings often took place in the summer and were celebrated for over a week in the houses of the rich, and in houses like ours, for three days. Dehusking paddy was the big job. Traditionally a job Madigas did and we sent for them. They kept a wooden trough around the husker so that paddy did not fall out, and pounded, three to a team. For banishing fatigue, they sang a song:

*Oh, daughter-in-law, oh, daughter-in-law,
Oh, the wife of my son.
Where is the cream on the fresh milk?
Where is the butter on the hot milk?
Where is the froth on the oil in the jar?
Oh, mother-in-law, oh tormenting mother-in-law
Is there cream on fresh milk?
Is there butter on hot milk?
Is there froth on oil in a jar?*

Weddings usually took place at night. Relatives came only if they were invited twice or thrice with bottu smeared on their foreheads ceremoniously and with due courtesy. In those days, time, printed wedding invitations had not yet become the vogue. As soon as the mangalasutra was tied, the priest asked those with gifts of money to approach. He read out gifts of Rs. 1 or 2. 'Rapolu Dharmaiah is giving Re 2,' he read out. He read out name after name and woke up sleeping relatives of the bride when gifts from the groom's side were being called out. These

presents were read out when people were half-asleep. Those were the days when people had no cash on hand to spare. What was given at one wedding was returned at another.

Young children were given stale food. Even if they complained of hunger, they were not fed immediately. Between three and four in the afternoon, the goat was slaughtered and people were asked to sit in rows. But before this, two kunchalu toddy was given to each person. Adults went to the palm groves or to the houses of relatives and drank toddy. That is why if one had to go for a wedding, even if one ate at home, one was hungry by the time food was served there.

Everybody sat in rows to eat. Before munching even a morsel, one had to first honour one's elders and ask their permission to eat. So we announced formally, *` Brother-in-law Narsaiah, I am about to eat, brother Mallana, I am going to eat, brother Papaiah, now I am eat,'* and so on, and then we ate. The fathers of the bridal pair had to pay their respects to everyone.

An egg sized piece of fat needed to melt in you to survive weddings.

The feast provided only two pieces of meat and a whole lot of gravy, after this, the soup with the head bones and the fat of the goat, for which we waited patiently from the moment we woke up. Small children found this impossible to bear.

A bath twice a day, but food only once.

The Chakalis prepared the bride and groom for the processional palanquin. Two on one side, two on the other, the procession was usually taken out at night. The music band, drummers, shehnais/nadaswarams, lanterns – all these made a huge commotion.

Some rich people even placed the groom in a palanquin when it was time to take him away. In households like ours, we went by bullock cart, and only arranged a palanquin for the procession in the village. Weddings were arranged when one was young. If the wedding was in the bride's house, the feast was at the groom's the next day. Here it was the same meal. Mutton and toddy was compulsory. People drank and raked up old grievances, and it was difficult to calm them down.

Someone would say that the bottu was not put on him (meaning he was not invited), another would say that he was looked down upon while toddy was poured. It was mainly sons-in-law who raised these grievances. Alleged non-observance of traditional courtesies was contentious. These were common at all weddings. This is why it was always asked, *`Did the wedding pass peacefully?'* Even modest weddings caused a famine for six months at home.

My father's parents lived to eighty. They stayed one month with us, one month with my uncle. No one gave medicines to old people. They covered themselves with bedsheets, and suffered from cough and breathlessness. If at any time, Raju from the adjacent village came to ours, he gave them some tablets. They faded away very slowly, weakening by the day.

My grandmother died first. Within a month of her death, my grandfather also died. In his last days, he lay on his bed and hallucinated. He would shout, *`Yama's people have come. Look! They are on my throat. Hold me, please!'* That is how we came to know that he would die soon. He continued hallucinating till one morning, he died.

`Touch him and the old man's life is snuffed out.'

As soon as grandfather died, the Gangeddollu and Katipapalu, two castes, arrived, though heaven knows how they learnt about the death so soon. The Gangeddollu made a lot of noise. Two of them danced, one of them lay down, and had an ox place its hoof on him. The man and ox would then run about, the man praising the one who had died. Katipapalu came to the burning ghats. One lay on the pyre, praising my grandfather, and would get down from the pyre only after he was promised something for the funeral rituals. We had to spend a lot of money for the eleven-day period of mourning. My uncles and we performed this well though.

A daughter was born to my eldest brother. Because it was a girl, my mother's happiness knew no bounds. My grandmother's name was Mangamma. The little baby was light-skinned and pretty and looked like my mother. My mother's anxiety that there were no girls in our house now vanished. She said, 'It is only daughters who weep when we die.'

Firewood was always scarce. Pastes of cattle dung and paddy husks was patted into flat cakes and when dry, used for fuel. When the fire was lit, two of these cakes were also placed amidst the fire. Thumma (babool) trees used to grow aplenty in nearby Annaram. In the summer, the shepherds chopped leafy branches, grazed their goats on them. Four or five of us chopped up the bare branches they left behind, tied them into bundles, and brought them home. They were useful in the rainy season when damp wood did not burn well. There was smoke all over the house, and our eyes smarted because we were put to work, blowing continuously on the damp wood.

By the fire was an empty pot. If water was poured into this, it stayed hot enough for the rice and curry to cook in it. Children were bathed in hot water. There was also a pot of kali.⁷² If water from this was used for cooking rice, it came up fluffy and white and was tasty, nor did it spoil easily either. When the rice left over rice from the night was eaten in the morning, it had a fine and different taste. When the millet crop came in, we had millet gruel once a day, as also with the maize crop when it was harvested. Rice was eaten at night. Millet and maize were heavy cereals and if eaten in the morning, kept hunger pangs at bay for longer than rice did, so that was what was cooked for the morning meal. We ate it with some pickle, and followed it up with buttermilk.

'Cooked rice does not stay, the sinking sun will not remain.'

Both millet and maize were dehusked manually in the mortar with a pestle like paddy was, into rice. Paddy dehusked once lasted us for two to three days.

*The pestle in my hands is black
brother, fix a silver ring to it
if I hit it once, saying 'suvva'
so loud the sound
the stars and the sun know this and move
if I hit, saying 'assa'
the sky moves as also the kingdom
if a sinner jumps into a well
only the dirt washes off, not the sin*

⁷² Rice is cooked with the water drained out of the last cooked rice. Water drained from cooking rice is placed in a pot, called the kali pot. With continuous additions, the brew ferments. Rice is cooked with this water, giving it a sour taste..

*Shankaruda, these are not good days for me
Why did you get married*

Sometimes, the cattle (oxen and buffaloes) went missing, sending us in search of them in the villages nearby. If the cattle had been locked up in a cattle pound, we paid the fine and had them released. Sometimes, they returned to their former owner from whom we had purchased them, and we got them back from those people. If we still did not find them, we went to Kummari Mutyalamma who read the future. She would say, 'It has gone to the east, it has crossed four villages.' She made these forecasts only if we gave her paddy.

Sometimes there were small thefts at home, and we went to soothsayers. If we got the stolen goods back, well and good, otherwise we cursed the robber. One woman's husband ran away without telling her. Mutyalamma looked at her palm, closed her eyes, thought of God and told her what happened. If one went to the soothsayers, the past and hidden facts came to light.

When green and red gram had to be dehusked, they were roasted, and then ground lightly between two rotating stones.

*how can we bathe if a bird draws water for us?
How can we eat if a swan cooks rice?
In the moonlight, it looks as if thousands of beds are spread*

Baireddi Veera Reddy's house was close by. We called him uncle. He was 45 years old then. He learnt burrakathas and sang them.

*Rama, Rama, Seetharama
Victory to Rama Raghurama, tandaana taana⁷³
Oh brothers, oh lords,
Rangayya dora rules over the Bobbili fort
Vijayaramaraju rules over Vijayanagaram*

*What kind of a person is Rangarayudu?
he has the royal sign, does Rangayya dora
On his back he carries arrows ready for battle
Vengalrayudu is his brother
Dharmarayudu is Vengalrayudu's brother in law
Dharmarayudu's brother in law is Paparayudu
Paparayudu is the lion of the fort
Children don't sleep if they hear his name
They don't drink milk if they hear his name
The brave women also fought
They stood like lions
in a circle like a wheel
they cut at the circle of elephants
Hyder Jung shuddered when he heard this.*

My uncle Sattenna sang in the chorus. Women liked burrakatha artistes. They were always

⁷³ Refrain for the dance

after my uncle, yet no one thought otherwise in the village. It was my aunt who farmed with the help of farmhands. Sattenna went underground for four or five years during the troubled times.

When I was in class II, comrades used to come to Sattena's house. There was commotion in the villages all around, the comrades would come to our village, shout slogans and hold meetings. Rich families left the village, fearing them.

One day, sangham members came from another village. They gathered our village youth and took out a procession with red flags. They tied red flags to the neem tree in front of the dora's gadi as well as also near the Kotamaisamma temple. They sang songs, held a meeting, burnt the papers of the patel and patwari and demolished their houses, allowing grain stock to be carried away by the villagers. There was an atmosphere of fear.

'The dalam is coming.'

'Land to the tiller'.

'Ban forced labour.'

These were the slogans they raised. They also sang,

Even if knives are stuck into you

Even if blood flows

Don't lower the raised flag

Hail the red flag.

There were songs of this kind sung in processions. They set up a village sangham. Young people came forward enthusiastically. They distributed grazing lands and the lands of the patel and dora to the poor. We got two acres near the stream. Sometimes, each sangham member was taken to separate houses for a meal, sometimes all of us children went from house to house, asking for cooked rice, carried it all to the sangham members where they stayed in sheds outside the village. Those who did not like to give food said that we were collecting food for robbers.

We formed children's sanghams, carried red flags and sang songs, going around in processions; it was a game for us. There were rumours that the razakars⁷⁴ were near Kolapadu and Tekumatla, that in a day or two, they would come to our village, that there had been encounters between the razakars and the comrades at Ravulapenta, that two or three people had died in the skirmish, that people were thrown onto haystacks in Balemla and Suryapet, and set fire to. We were terrified. There was razakar activity in villages around ours. We started staying awake at night to keep watch. There were Muslims in our village, but they never thought of themselves as different people, and were always one with us in every activity. We addressed each other as relatives did – *baava*, *anna*, *chelle*, *akka*⁷⁵. They had no separate convictions, but were certainly fond of food.

We held a procession, proclaiming that Independence had come. This did not go on for too long. My father did not get on well with the comrades.

⁷⁴ Razakars were a private militia organized to support the rule of the Nizam and resist the integration of Hyderabad State in India.

⁷⁵ Brother-in-law, elder brother, younger sister, elder sister

Our Sattena joined the Party. We had no idea where he was. There were rumours that the whole village had joined the comrades. One night, police came to our house and created a commotion, demanding to know where Sattena was. They told us that they would definitely shoot him and threatened to shoot us if we did not lead them to him. We trembled with fear because people from surrounding villages were saying that police were indeed shooting people like they shot birds.

There was war between the razakars and the Indian Army. We could hear bombs exploding and were told that the army had reached Durachipalli. When a bomb exploded on a hill nearby, the entire village fled. We thought that lives were important. If we were alive, we could survive in the wilds, eating the plentifully growing balisaku (though even goats shunned them). We reached Nelamani camp, walking all night, where we stayed ten days before leaving for Jaggayyapet where our relatives lived.

PART TWO

*There is no burning in the world like that of hunger
there is no village like ours
there is no one on earth like mother
There are no people like mine.*

At Jaggayyapet, my brothers and father wove at the loom. When they had no work there, they went to Mangalagiri for work. They could not stay at one place for a long period of time. Much time was spent in search of work.

I was not studying. Playing marbles, gathering cigarette butts and playing cards with other feckless children like me – this is how I spent my time. Our relatives had a small shop where they sold snacks. They did not know how to weave. From the very start, they were into small businesses.

A small stream flowed near Jaggayyapet, by which stood a temple where puja was performed every evening. After the puja, there was some prasadam, either pulihora or curd rice. If I reached on time, I got some.

After four months, when we came to know that the commotion had died down, we returned home. The Nizam's rule had ended and had been replaced by military rule. Repression on the Comrades increased and Malabar Police forces had been brought in. They surrounded our village one night, gathered all the villagers at the village square, asked for the whereabouts of the comrades, beat up all the men one by one and abused the women horribly.

Landlords of villages surrounding ours became Congress leaders overnight. Wearing khadi and with military personnel along with them, they raided the houses of sangham members. When the military came to our village, they did not spare our house. They broke our door, cots and benches.

We came to know that my brother was caught by the military in the Rachakonda hillocks and jailed. After this news, police stopped coming to our house. My father went a number of times to Nalgonda, suffered a great deal, and after four months, freed my brother. We had to leave the land given to us by the sangham. Those who wore khadi were now dictators in the village. Those who left the village returned. There was peace. My brother did not like to live in the

village. He went to Suryapet and learnt how to work on a sewing machine. He set up house in a village nearby and went into the sewing business.

My village had a dora. He was also the karnam. His house was called the gadi. Sangham members destroyed the gadi, as also the house of the patel as they thought that the big house would allow police to come and stay here. They destroyed it as a possible shelter for police. The day after it was destroyed, all of us children went there and picked up the papers and dolls. Our dora and patel were not bad people. Yet their houses were destroyed as in other villages.

The dora used to sit on polished stones beneath the neem tree in front of his gadi, observing passersby. If he saw a Sudra, he gave him some work or the other.

'Hey, go to Bheempangi Mallaiah's house and tell him that I am calling him here.'

'Maskuri Ramulu has not come. Can you go to his house and ask him to come here.'

'We have no vegetables, it seems you have bottlegourd in your backyard; why don't you send us some?'

'Why didn't you tell me in whose house ridge gourd is growing well?'

After all, he was the dora, and also the patwari. People could never refuse him. This was the oppression of our dora! If he sat on the stones in front of his gadi, people went through the parallel bazaar. He could even get work out of the thatched roof! He never gave details of lands to anyone. If anybody went to him for this, he would make them go around in circles.

'Come today, come tomorrow,'

'The book is in the tahsil office, when I go there, I will look into it and tell you,' etc.

The Reddys always had the jobs of the mali patel⁷⁶ and police patel.⁷⁷ The patel was called pedda patel, his relatives, Chinna patellollu and the middling farmers were accosted as 'patela'. Those farmers who cultivated their one or two acres themselves were called Chelka Kapollu⁷⁸ The term patel meant only the Mali patel or police patel. The patwari was the man who saw to land; its measurements, tilling and revenue. The police patel oversaw disputes in the village, visitors and their antecedents, noting births and deaths. Land revenue was collected jointly by the mali patel and patwari. On the days when tax was collected, there was a big crowd outside the gadi. If anybody failed to pay tax and had dues, the village maskuris went to his house, stood outside, abusing him horribly, then caught him and fetched him to stand in the patel's courtyard; people begged or borrowed the required amount to avoid being in this situation. The tax was never more than Rs. 2 or Rs. 3.

The dora's son was a practising lawyer. The other two sons were Government employees. The younger son was under the tutelage of his father, looking after land details and farming their land. The actual farming was done by farmhands. The senior farmhand was called sheridar, and the dora trusted him implicitly. The other farmhands had to obey him, the sheridar was their dictator. Nobody could guess how much the dora cultivated or what the yield was.

The fields near the village were all the patel's. The fields in front of my house were also his. I loved the songs the labourers sang when they transplanted and weeded.

⁷⁶ The mali patel collected land revenue and other village income at the behest of the patwari

⁷⁷ The police patel enforced law and order in the village

⁷⁸ chelka is field and Kapu is the generic name for the caste of Reddis

<i>Near the small hill,</i>	<i>on the way to Nagumalle,</i>
<i>Moonlight struck,</i>	<i>on the way to Nagumalle</i>
<i>He is both your uncle and mine,</i>	<i>on the way to Nagumalle</i>
<i>Wearing white clothes</i>	<i>on the way to Nagumalle</i>
<i>On my way to bring white jowar</i>	<i>on the way to Nagumalle</i>
<i>the night passed</i>	<i>on the way to Nagumalle</i>
<i>with his glance</i>	<i>on the way to Nagumalle</i>

The Reddys of our village had surnames such as Baireddy, Onteddu, Malgireddy, Chittep, Nalmari.

'The names of paddy, Reddy, oxen, are ever so many.'

Among these, the Baireddys had the jobs of mali or police patel. They were also landlords. They were followed by the Nalmaris, Onteddu and then, the others lower down in scale. Relationships were never newly made outside the village. The Baireddys, Nalmaris and Onteddus gave and took girls from among themselves. Agricultural lands were taken and given as dowry. Never was there a relationship from outside the village. Weddings took place in this fashion because the doting parents wanted their daughters within sight at all times. Our Reddys had relatives only in two or three villages. If there was a wedding, all they had to do was to send our village washerman to these two or three villages to inform them. There were also no differences or quarrels over dowry and gifts.

Don't cultivate the field near the village
Don't marry within the village
The field near the village is eaten by crows
The wedding within the village is ridden with nasty words
Cook sweet puris this holy day
Did you call all our people?
Cooking dosas on amavasya
Go call our people, son-in-law.

Because of this, the girls of our village remained here, and we did not have to travel to other villages. Sometimes, we went to Suryapet. Quite often, girls were also not sent to school in those times. The revenue inspector who wore trousers and shoes, came to the village to collect levy foodgrains. If he came to the village, it spelt doom for us. Farmers scattered to their fields. His staff went from house to house and forcibly measured out foodgrains for levy. Yields were low. How could we pay levy? It was this fear that drove farmers away from their houses to the fields.

<i>The farmer threshed the grain</i>	<i>oh, moon</i>
<i>He repaid his debts</i>	<i>oh, moon</i>
<i>He toiled hard and grew grain</i>	<i>oh, moon</i>
<i>He grows this but gives to government</i>	<i>oh, moon</i>
<i>He sells the fine variety</i>	<i>oh, moon</i>
<i>He eats the coarse remainder</i>	<i>oh, moon</i>
<i>He feeds the world</i>	<i>oh, moon</i>
<i>But bears grief himself</i>	<i>oh, moon</i>
<i>He is softer than butter</i>	<i>oh, moon</i>
<i>Oh moon, he is better than you.</i>	<i>oh moon</i>

The visiting revenue inspector sat before the dora's gadi. He stayed for a day or two, loaded the levy grain onto bullock carts and left. As long as he was there, the maskurs (village servants) and vetti Madigas⁷⁹ were at his beck and call. After the grain was measured out, there was never any money left. The levy money itself was raised after one or two months of roaming around for loans.

The village servants were a harassed lot when the revenue inspector was in the village. There had to be fish or chicken for his morning meal. For dinner, there had to be country liquor and if this was not to be found, toddy from a tree. The revenue inspector had a Norton motorcycle. One knew that he was on the way by the roar of his mount even when he was far from the village. He also carried a countrymade gun with which he hunted.

When Maskuri Ramulu told him that there were waterfowl in Aavucheruvu, the revenue inspector told him, 'Come on, let's go', and took the maskuri along with him to the tank where, by the embankment, he hid behind the tumma trees, took aim for a long time, and shot. At that time, another gunshot was heard and the flock of ducks flew away. Only one fowl fell to his shot, and as it struggled in the pond, the maskuri got into the pond and caught hold of it. An Erukala from a nearby village came up to the maskuri and said, 'This fell to my shot.' When the maskuri said, 'Hey, is your aim better than the revenue inspector's? Do you have a licence for your gun?' the Erukala slunk away. Chakali Venkulu came to pluck the feathers of the duck; when he left to collect palm leaves to scorch the duck with, the cat crept up and made away with the duck. What a commotion there was! The revenue inspector had to make do with dal and pickle for that meal.

Off and on, police came in for observation. When they did, the maskuri would hit the roosters that roamed on the dung heap. Whichever rooster was caught would be cut in halal⁸⁰ fashion that day. The owner kept silent, fearing police. Children would not leave their houses if policemen were around we pissed in fear if we heard their names.

Part III

⁷⁹ Madigas, the major subcaste of Scheduled Castes in Telangana, were bonded. They were forced to work free for the dora and the government. In return, they were given small plots of land to cultivate.

⁸⁰ Islamic way of killing an animal for food. The head was never beheaded in one stroke; instead the jugular of the bird/animal was cut and blood allowed to drip slowly from the numb creature which felt no pain.

Till I joined school, I wore a silver chain, bracelets on my wrists and gold earring. The left earring had a white pearl embedded in it. We wore half shirts and knickers – these were of rough cheap cloth which did not tear easily. They were washed once or twice a week. I would take part of the collar between my teeth and chew at it. I don't know why, but many children did this. We always had lice in our hair and scratching our heads was a task.

There were no barbers in the village. Only two barbers from nearby villages had the work of shaving and cutting the hair of all the men and boys in the village. They went to the houses of the patellu, shaved them and cut their hair. People of lower castes like us had to wait on them in the bazaar where they came once a week or once in ten days, to shave and cut everyone's hair. The barber who cut our hair had lost an eye. We called him the blind barber. His shave was acceptable, but not his cropping of hair. There was a hairstyle called the girdhawar crop. It was neither a crop nor a complete shave. The barber shaved all the hair from the middle to the front. This was considered a pleasing style for children. Our blind barber went to work on all of us because it was an uncomplicated style and took very little time. I did not like it at all but my mother sat by and ensured that I had a close crop. Since we had haircuts only once in two or three months, my head looked like a plucked chicken. It pleased my mother who exclaimed, 'How good it looks!' When these barbers who were paid an annual fee came to our house, they ate lunch with us.



We had water in big earthen vessels for our baths placed next to the cooking vessels on the hearth. My mother used hot water and she thought, the hotter the better. We were afraid of using soap. When my sister-in-law returned from a visit to her mother's house, she brought back a big round soap. After the bath, the soap was placed on the ground and sand stuck to it grittily. It was not pleasant to be scratched with this soap so I disliked bathing with soap. Rice gruel was massaged into the head and washed off after a haircut. This was pleasant. On other days, it was an ordinary bath.

There were four or five houses of potters in the eastern bazaar, who collected mud from the tank during summer and made pots. We got pots of different sizes and shapes for our needs from them. In summer, water stored in these pots was cool. Every item was paid for in paddy.

Right in the centre of the village were the houses of two tailor caste families, of whom Mere Veeresham stitched for us. He made one do the rounds for a week just to stitch a single set of vests and shorts. I would circle his house continuously till the clothes were done. If the customer was well-to do like the patels, he delivered the stitched clothes at their houses.

My mother stitched blouses for women. These were plain blouses. My sisters wore gundila blouses.⁸¹ We used to weave 8 yard 20 count saris. The sari was tied high up in those days, often just below the knees.

Men wore vests only when they visited another village or attended a wedding. Otherwise, the upper cloth (kanduva) served the purpose of a cover. Elderly men wore a half shirt with two pockets, rather like the 'bush shirt' of today.

The washerman came every day with his basket. We gave him rice and curry. He took this in his basket, tied the soiled clothes into a bundle and left. When men bathed, they did so with their dhotis on. These were taken off later, and put aside for the dhobi, who picked them up, boiled and washed them, and brought them back a shade of grey.

The well near the village was called Chakali bayi, because it was here that the washermen used alkaline mud and lime, boiled and washed clothes and brought them back in the evening to the houses of their owners. The food they asked for covered a single meal. At night, they either cooked or ate the leftovers from morning.

'You neither have to cook nor weave.'

When they washed clothes, they rhythmically chanted 'aam – aam' or 'Usso – usso', while pounding the clothes on the rocks. The beat was musical, and the alkaline mud and lime hit their foreheads. The hair in the middle of their foreheads was brown with this combination by which one could spot a washerwoman. Besides, the washerman's back was bent double, because of the loads of clothes he always carried.

⁸¹ These blouses had no buttons, but were knotted under the breasts

Durajpalligutta was 4-5 kilometres from our village. That hillock had an incredible number of seethaphal trees. Villagers from my village went in groups after dark, climbed the hillock, gathered firm fruit and let them ripen for two or three days.

It was mostly on moonlit nights that we went, avoiding the main paths to ensure that the contractor did not notice us. We walked silently between the rocks, crossing each rock carefully. This was difficult but we got used to it. If we lost our foothold, we could fall right into the valley.

There were big trees on the hillock called Bogumdani gadde. The fruit that ripened on these was very sweet. We ate these, and carrying sacks of the fruit on our heads, reached home by dawn via Nagulapati Darwaja. We did this every year.

Opposite the Durajpalli hillock was Lingamanthulaswami. The Gollagunta jatra (temple fair) was held here once in two years for three days. The Gollas went to the jatra in a procession of bullock carts with their sacrificial goats and shouting all the while, 'O Lingo! O lingo!' Their faces were smeared with turmeric and kumkum, wearing anklets and holding knives, some of them trancing, they reached the hillocks. All of those from the nearby districts who had taken a vow to the deity reached the hillock for the jatra. This was a big festival for the Gollas.⁸²



82 A shepherd caste that grazes cattle

The hillock was near our village, so we left at night and reached there on foot by dawn. The hillock flamed red at dawn. The hillock too was red with slaughtered goats wherever one looked. Bullock carts surrounded the hillock. Men and women jostled each other in such a rush that there was no place to move. Youngsters came to take advantage of the crush.

*The jattras of shepherds
is very great, it seems
Let us go and visit, let us pray to Linganna
Saying, Lingo! Lingo!
Let us bathe in the pond, go around the temple
Slaughter a male goat and fulfil our vows*

The jatra came in February or March in the beginning of summer. Because water was scarce, we had to fetch water from the motabavis near the hillock. There was a pond but it was dry. People drank sodas of different colours to quench their thirst. Shops came up selling chocolates, bird-shaped candies, sweets made of jaggery, snacks and toys. Girls and boys came here to elope. The bangle shops were full of women. There were also small circuses and shows with monkeys, there were jugglers shouting, `Oye! Watch the Bombay tamasha!'

*Come and watch Kalipatnam, Babu
See Viswanatha
Watch the rippling Ganga river
See the colourful Holi festival
See Delhi and its Red Fort
See the city which the Pandavas ruled
See the beauty of the Taj Mahal.*

Close by were thatched huts selling toddy and country liquor. Children separated from their parents wailing, the shouts of parents searching for them, everyone busy doing something. The jatra was a feast for the eyes. One or two couples always eloped during the jatra, and returned home in a week or ten days when they had run out of money. The girl's parents would tell everyone that their daughter had gone to a relative's house.

In the western bazaar, were about ten houses of the Golla people. Their sheep were penned in the thatched sheds in front of their houses. At dawn, goat and sheep were herded to fields where there were no crops and left to graze. One or two dogs went along. These dogs never left the herd, guarding it day and night. The shepherds stood all day, leaning on their sticks under a tree and nodding off to sleep. Golla Mutthilingam was adept at playing the flute. His melodies could be heard from afar, and were very pleasing.



Where there were showers, we had no work. My brother would buy a ram, slaughter it and sell the meat. Not everyone in my community bought the meat. They came asking for meat when the ram was slaughtered. No one paid at once. My brother went from house to house for a week and then paid the Golla, the owner of the ram. When people came to get some meat, they were full of pleasantries but would make him do the rounds repeatedly and make a great fuss when it came to paying him, cursing,

‘Let the whore die! Let the bed break!’

My brother would slap himself on his cheeks and vow that he would never buy and slaughter a ram again. But it was not possible for him to keep his promise during festivals and occasions. The Gollas had to sell, which is why it is said,

One has no money, but plenty of courage.

The Somappa jatra lasted in the same place for 15 days during Shivaratri near the Musi and quite near our village where there was an old Shiva temple. As in all jatras, petty shops came up overnight. Since the jatra went on for many days, there was not much rush. We packed our food at leisure.

*Girl, let us go to the jatra
The Somappa jatra is going on
Husband, what you say is fine
but enough of your sweet talk
I have no sari to wear
nor do I have ornaments*

*Our relatives and neighbours will laugh at me *
How well you speak, husband!
How can I come?
I bought you a silk sari yesterday
And a shining blouse the day before
Come on, girl, let us go
The Somappa jatra is going on.

'Sweet talk, terrible rush.' (Lack of privacy due to crowds)

We roamed all day and slept at night on the banks of the Musi. Sleeping on soft sand with the cool river breeze blowing on us was pleasant. It was considered good to sleep over one night at the jatra. There is a tunnel on the temple precincts. If we entered it, we smelt bats. If we went in a little further, the smell was unbearable. The tunnel went for a long distance, it is said. No one had explored it. People went in for a little distance and returned.

Jatras always took place when people had no work. Groups of friends went to jatras leisurely. Newly married couples also attended went to fulfil a vow they might have made.

If you are going, do go, but, lady, be careful!
The Somappa jatra is a beautiful one
I went to the jatra and drank holy water
I broke a coconut and lit a lamp
I circambulated the sanctum sanctorum
A rogue came silently
He put his arm around me and fondled me
When I looked back, he was gone
Such things happen at Somappa god's temple.

The Golla people worshipped Gangamma – they had whitewashed a rock on the embankments of Mailasamudram, and decorated it with vermillion. There were small shops and children ran about happily. We begged a coin from mother or father and roamed happily all day at the jatra, returning home in the evening. Not that everything was fun. The shops were run by our village Pusalollu⁸³, and we didn't see anything new in them.

There was a Pusali family in the bazaar next to ours. Pusala Venkulu was a cripple, and in fact, had no legs. He had two wives. They carried baskets of small items like needles and pins and spices and sold them. Venkulu did not work, yet ran his household easily.

Big dhoti, but nothing inside.

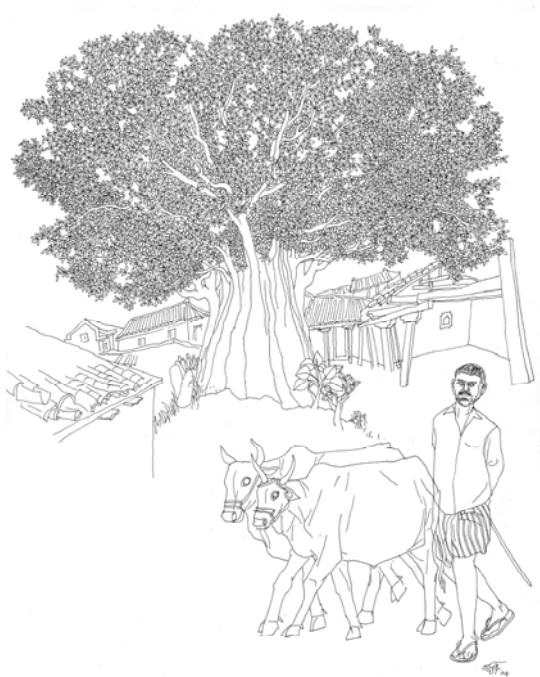
His wives quarreled loudly every day. Kunti Venkulu would get angry, sit on the mortar, summon one of his wives, hold her by the hair and pummel her mercilessly. Unless you

⁸³ Pusalollu is a caste whose members were petty traders, often selling farm produce

watched this, you could not understand how such a small man could beat a wife so much bigger than him. Their household ran peacefully. Thus there were also people who did no work.

Near our house stood two Reddy houses, people who were considered `Kapollu' (farmers). They cultivated millets, green gram, jowar, groundnut and paddy on their lands near the tank and when it was time to harvest the groundnut crop, slept in their fields to keep guard.

If one stays near a kapu (farmer) one has enough to eat.



If I went with them, I roasted and ate groundnuts at night and brought back some for the household when I returned in the morning. I was not able to sleep at night as hyenas howled and it was very cold. We saw flames from afar, what people called flame demons. But they were not demons, they were probably fires like ours lit to ward off the cold or roast groundnuts.

There was a small square near the school where, some panchayat meeting was conducted all the time. Caste elders sat, playing with words, questions and replies. Venkulu who contradicted everyone, was called Mondhi (stubborn) Venkulu. He always spoke against on any issue.

Neither does the snake die nor the stick break.

When Venkulu sat in the panchayat, no problem could be solved. Those who thought that they

would not win their case in the panchayat almost always nominated Venkulu as their representative.

The panchayat adjourned twice or thrice, then gave its verdict and imposed a fine. It was not a problem to collect fines because the elders collected deposits from both sides at the outset. The verdicts were always delicately in accordance of both parties and in accordance with customary law (dhama). Most verdicts were reached through amicable negotiations. Penubada village was near ours. There was a police station there, but no case of beating, abuse or quarrel reached the station from our village. Every case was settled only in the village. The beat constable sometimes came to our village, but found no work and left.

Lathkor Saheb (beggar) came wearing an old coat, trouser bottoms turned up, a hat, a bag on his shoulders and a toy rifle. He went from house to house saying, *'Look, how rich I am. I have everything. I have lands, houses and granaries. The lands to the east are mine, those to the west are mine, i have everything. I have a house in town, a temple in the city. I have a hut outside the village, I poured rice into the pond and lit a fire under the sluice, but the rice did not cook, the chicken do not have grain. That is why I have come to your house. Master, give me alms. I, Lathkor Saheb have come; may your children prosper.'* Little children followed him, fascinated by his funny dress and talk.

Ten kilometers from my village, near Nedujarla, was the Janpadu dargah⁸⁴. People visited this shrine, not only from this district, but from other faraway ones too. The saint of this dargah was buried here hundreds of years ago, and it was believed that he was yet alive in his tomb, heard the woes of devotees, solved them and blessed devotees with wealth and good health. Every Friday, hundreds of devotees congregated here. Childless people believed that children would be born to them if they took a vow here. Children so born were called Saidulu, Saidamma, Saidi Reddy, Janayya, Janamma. There were very many people in our village with these names.

⁸⁴ Peculiar to the subcontinent, Muslim 'shrines' shunned by orthodox Islam, held in reverence by both Muslims and Hindus.



On Friday, devotees set off at dawn with their relatives and friends with the sacrificial ram in bullock carts; they prayed, slaughtered the goat, cooked a pulao and offered this to Saidulu as prasadam. Friends and relatives ate and reached home by evening. Those who had made a vow at the dargah let a ram loose in the name of Saidulu which they reared for two or three years. Their wishes would be fulfilled during these years. No robber stole a ram consecrated to Saidulu. Nor was it ever killed for any other purpose. It had to be sacrificed only at Saidulu's dargah. However tough the meat of the ram, it cooked well in the water from the well. There was also a belief that if people suffering from chronic illnesses slept for a few weeks at Saidulu's dargah, they would be cured. After their wishes were fulfilled, they had their children tonsured.

Every Friday, hundreds of rams were sacrificed at this dargah frequented more by Hindus than Muslims.

The houses of the Madigas were in the east. Chinna Veeraiah was close to my father, so we were given land with alkaline soil near the tank because of this friendship. If he wanted any money, Chinna Veeraiah came to us and repaid it in the form of grain during the harvest. We addressed each other as brothers and sisters do. Poverty haunted the Madiga hamlet where no cooking fires burned at night. Madiga farmhands took their payment in advance for some need and their women ran the houses with what they earned from agricultural labour. Women from the Madigagudem went to dehusk paddy for weddings and functions and took back broken rice with them. If the mother got dehusking work, the children were fed. They sang to relieve themselves of the exhaustion of hard labour.

*Suvvi, suvanna,⁸⁵
 Chunchu Mallanna,
 Patwari Subbanna,
 He is Suramma's husband, ha suvvi.
 Suramma's husband has no moustache,
 The Kotappa hill
 Has no beams
 Oh, Suvvi!
 This song was sung by young newly weds
 We are young
 But we won't work
 Oh moon, we want you to shine in the day⁸⁶
 Once when night falls,
 We cannot stay
 Give us common sense
 Oh Mother Earth.*

Older Madiga people stitched chappals and thongs for the motabavis, while younger people worked as bonded labourers. Even if they had some land, they did not cultivate it, and were always looking out to see where they could get a loan. No Madiga household ate thrice a day.

At festival time, some men would fasten anklets, another would wrap a shoulder cloth like a belt about his waist, a third would carry a butcher's knife and they all danced and sang while another four or five men played the dappu⁸⁷, set up a the chorus and generally raised a commotion. They performed in the courtyards of the houses of big farmers and asked for grain. People loved to watch them as they sang, danced and acted, playing myriad beats on the dappu.

The houses of Malas were close by. Some had converted to Christianity. They too worked as wage labourers. Some four or five households wove coarse cloth and bedsheets, tied this into big bundles and went from village to village, selling them. In my village, not a single Mala household prospered though they were intelligent people. They did not have sufficient land to cultivate.

The bazaar to the south was that of the Vadolllu of whom there were four or five households. They did both carpentry and pottery work, and repaired ploughs, agricultural tools, and wheel spokes in the summer. There was always a group at the furnace, talking idly of village matters. Old people who did not work, gathered under the neem trees, smoked their cigars and whiled away their time. When the carpenter was asked to repair something, he delayed for two to three days before repairing the plough or the instrument. At the smithy, the carpenter sat blowing or else hitting it on his anvil. Because agricultural work depended on him, when the showers began, a stream of people came to him. Whoever wanted work done by the carpenter had perforce, to do all the small jobs the carpenter asked him to do, so that

⁸⁵ Suvi is used by the women as a rhythmic chant to accompany the pounding

⁸⁶ The lazy long for the night

⁸⁷ The leather drum beaten by the Madigas, now also the symbol of the Madiga Dandora, a Madiga renaissance movement

his own repairs would get done faster. Farmers paid a kind of tax to the carpenter for the number of ploughs they owned. When grain was gathered in heaps after the harvest, this payment was paid.

Kansali (goldsmith) Narayan's house was next to the Dora's. He was engaged in small tasks all the time, blowing away at his oven. If anyone had work with the goldsmith, he kept watchful company from the time of weighing the gold to melting it and fashioning the ornament, so that the quantity of gold did not reduce. There was not much melting or fashioning of gold done. More often, it was silver and steel bracelets and armlets. The goldsmith wore spectacles, his eyes damaged by the constant furnace smoke. His spectacles kept slipping off his nose, unless he tied a string to them. Seated at the oven constantly, his back had become bent. He was unable to straighten up.

There were two houses of the Komatis who were petty traders. When people wanted oil, tamarind or salt, they gave paddy in exchange. Very few households purchased groceries for the month. The patels who sold their paddy at Suryapet, bought their groceries there. It was the poor who purchased their daily needs at the Komatis; these were oil, salt and chillies. There were no big traders in our village. In nearby Khammampadu, there were about ten Komati houses. People who needed capital for farming went there. The Komati initially delayed giving agricultural loans, and when he did, wrote a note for it. When the crops ripened, one had to fill bullock carts with paddy, groundnut or whatever produce one had grown and hand it over to him to repay the loan.

Petty traders brought onions and red chillies in bullock carts, parked them outside the dora's gadi and sold their wares. Some sold their wares on credit and collected paddy when the harvests were in.

Cotton was grown on the black soil to the west of the village. If the rains were plentiful, crop yields were good. When the cotton was placed in a small tool, the hand-roller gin, cotton and seeds separated with a whirring noise. The cotton was beaten till it was soft, slivers were made and fed into the charkha to shape bobbins.

*The cotton plant lends beauty to the plain girl
There is no house without a butter churn
No hut without the spindle making cotton into yarn
No village without a loom.*

Rolling cotton into slivers and turning slivers into yarn was skilled work. The older people did this well and patiently, and piled the slivers into baskets.

*Spin, oh spindle, spin oh spindle.
Let us fill the basket with slivers and go to the market
My slivers are all over, I have no care
If the spindle is well, Delhi prospers
Even if my husband does not come, I am not worried*

Bedsheets were made from this yarn and shirts and dhotis from fine yarn. The cloth was rough but comfortably cool to wear.

Vegetables were grown around homes. What else did one need? You could not see a rupee coin even if you wanted to. If there was a family crisis, we borrowed from a patel who had gone to Suryapet and sold his paddy. It was repaid at the time decided, with some difficulty. All this, in fact, everything worked on trust.

Some traders sold bedsheets, saris and dhotis on credit and returned during the harvest to collect their share of paddy. Everyone was fair in his/her dealings, but the prices were high. If one or two mean people refused to pay, the sellers left, cursing them.

There was a *thanda*⁸⁸ called Saidabasugudem. Every resident there was a Lambada. People were afraid to go there after dark as the Lambadas robbed people of all their belongings and beat them up. The Lambadas there did no work at all. Robbing was easy work. This was another solution for poverty. The Lambadas raised sweet yam, they brought these in bullock carts, traded it for paddy and left. At the time of the custard-apple season, they brought firm fruit from the Durajpalli hillock on their bullock carts and sold them here, taking paddy in exchange. There were also people carrying baskets of coriander seed and shouting out ‘Dhaniyallammo!’ in the streets to sell this. I liked the Lambadas who were both good looking and dressed colourfully.

Beggars, *Mondi* by caste, lived in huts on the outskirts of the village. Children were terrified when they whipped themselves with the lash. The man would slash himself with a knife, draw blood, and utter bloodcurdling cries while his wife played the drum in a terrifying fashion. Their children too would be crying out loudly; all this created a horrifying scene. The man was stubborn and did not leave till paddy was given to him. Children from all over gathered to watch this spectacle. These beggars divided into two or three batches, covering the entire village in two or three days and then left. If I ever dreamt of these people, I woke up shivering and sweating.

There were two or three *Dommari* houses. Their huts were a little away from the village where they reared pigs. When the showers began, they killed a pig. People used to this meat, returned for it. Though there were a couple of *Dommari* houses, there was always a commotion there every morning with a *panchayat*, with each one going on for two or three days. As long as they could, they cursed each other, then went to the *Goundla*’s house for *toddy*, where they made up after drinking. The quarrel would resurface in a few days.

‘My pig is lost-----“

“He killed my pig...”

“The pig you sold in that village was mine.....”

88 A habitation of the Lambada tribe

People who stayed near their huts never had a single night's sleep. For their major panchayats they sent for their relatives. They had two elders on either side, and spent a week, arguing, eating and drinking. By this time, the two aggrieved parties who were paying for the expenses would have gone broke, come to a compromise on their own and called off the panchayat. During the days the panchayat was on, no one did any work. They were shouting and cursing each other. Both parties spoke at the same time, no one understanding what it was all about. What was there to understand anyway when these were aimless panchayats.

Among the Dommaris, one girl was named for the goddess and set free of other roles. She was called Venkatasani and unmarried youth visited her. When they began itching and were dull and listless and contracted an infection, people would say, '*Ah! So you have gone to Venkatasani's hut*'. They hung their heads in shame. No one blamed them of course. Older women from these houses roamed from village to village with an idol in a basket under their armpits and practised soothsaying.

About 40-50 villagers from a nearby village came one night with branches in their hands, chanting '*Jairam, Jai Ram, Jai Hanuman, Veer Hanuman, Ram, Ram*'. Considering them Rama's army, our village elders welcomed them and took them in a procession to the Anjaneya temple. After all of us sang bhajans together, they left for their village. Youth from our village also formed a Ramadandu, and dancing like monkeys, went to nearby villages, sang bhajans at their temple and returned. With this, the Ramadandu yatra was complete.

My father wanted to farm. Since he had bought two acres of alkaline land near the tank from the Madigas, he dug a small well there and started cultivating with the two oxen bought exclusively for ploughing and drawing water from the neighbouring village Penbadu. These were lazy oxen. It took us ten days to finish the ploughing. We drew water to irrigate the land as long as the tank was full of water. After this, the crop grew with water let out from the tank. After we started farming, there was plenty of work. Except for coarse red paddy, nothing grew there. When we sowed the summer crop of paddy, all the animals of the village would wander into our lands. In the summer, yield was low. During summer, no one grazed their animals. They were let loose because there were no standing crops on the ground. I was free during the summer holidays and guarded the saplings in our fields, seated in the shade of a tumma tree on the edge of the well. We had no fertiliser except for our household wastes and cattle dung. As the rice was red, it was not tasty no matter what curry was eaten with it. We grew rice sufficient for our needs on this land.

Close by, on the banks of the Musi, was the ancient Nagulapati temple. I went with my friends to this temple walking cross-country, passing by Maisamma gandi and Nakkala thopu. The statues there were of black stone. The pillars, highly polished by time reflected our images in them. The temple was built by the Kakatiya kings, and was cool inside. Naughty children had etched their names on the stone. Tales from the Ramayana and Mahabharata were also carved in miniature on the stones. We roamed through it and reached home by evening.

At some distance from the village was the dora's orchard which had guava and mango trees. I got up before dawn, went to the orchard after removing a part of the fencing, plucked guavas

and returned home. The guavas birds had pecked were the tastiest. I did the same when it was mango season.

If after summer, the rains failed, water was poured into a small pot and a frog put into it. The pot was covered with a cloth, tied to a pole, and two women hoisted this on their shoulders and went from house to house, clapping their hands and singing,

*'We are arranging a wedding for the frog
we want rain.
we cry for rain
oh rain god, oh god of floods
we pray to you wherever you are.
why don't you come
The last rains wets so long ago
at least now
Rain, oh! father and mother of the world
where are you
we pray to you
the seeds sowed in the earth have spoilt
We ploughed but the birds ate these
where are you oh rain god,
we pray to you*

The Madigas were given inams, gifts of lands. Every household in the Madiga hamlet had one or two kuntas⁸⁹ of land. It was a complicated arrangement, with land put aside for the Madiga elder and for Madiga daughters married into other villages. This was cultivated on rotation because there were so many segments. People got a part of whatever yield came out of common cultivation. The Madigas beat the drum during festivals, for levy and revenue collection, taking turns doing this. The Pedda Madiga kept a record of whose turn came when. All this was unpaid labour. Potters and ironsmiths also had inam lands. The potter had to give new pots for water when government people visited and had to be at the beck and call of the patel and patwari till the visitors left. The beneficiaries of inam lands did not have to pay tax to government. The inam lands had been granted long ago to extract free labour in perpetuity, so members of the community divided this land amongst themselves and cultivated it. They sold it in times of distress or need. Free/forced/bonded labour came to an end with the entry of the Communists.

Dented metal pots were repaired as were those that had cracked. The menders set up their furnace under the neem trees near the dora's house. They took old copper vessels by weight and gave new ones in exchange. Brass vessels were brought from the Chanduru area. The rates varied for cash and credit purchase. Those who bought on credit paid during the harvest.

Those who repaired tin trunks and also painted them wore checked lungies and torn vests. They repaired the trunk, then painted it red with a large brush, and with a finer brush, gave it white strokes once or twice, turning the trunk pink and so very beautiful.

⁸⁹ 40 kuntas make one acre

Traders who sold gongadis (coarse hand-woven blankets made of local wool) stayed for two or three days, sold their wares and left. The blankets had borders. Red wool was braided with black by two people, and the ends were tasselled. Red and black made an attractive combination.

I don't know why, but we never purchased gongadis. Old clothes were sufficient for use as covers. Traders of petty goods, sellers who gave credit, came in the winter before Sankranthi as farmers had leisure then, and some spare grain to trade with.

Sometimes tattooists visited, mainly to Sudra and Madiga houses. They smeared herbal pastes, and tattooed on the arm. The names of husbands were tattooed on wives and vice versa. Pictures of Rama, Krishna, Hanuman and others were also tattooed. The arm swelled for a couple of days, then subsided. The picture never faded. Girls with green tattooed dots on their forehead, cheek and chin were considered attractive.

*Do tattoos with green ink, brother in law (cousin/lover)
give four annas or half anna and get it done
the god on the hill
the god inside the temple
get yourself tattooed
but the dots should be done well*

Kite flying before Sankranthi was popular. We prepared kites with bamboo twigs and paper and flew them. Sometimes, they did not rise. Hoping that attaching a longer tail would help them fly, we tried this repeatedly, till in the end, one out of four rose. Children yelled and shouted while flying kites. 'Let me pull, let me pull,' jostling each other to pull the thread. In the commotion, the thread snapped, the kite fell out of the sky and got entangled in the branches of a tree. With this, that particular kite-flying session came to a close.

If we needed a Brahmin, we went to Singareddipalem and told Bapani Narayana to whom one appealed to fix dates for weddings and other functions. He always came later than scheduled. He would give some excuse for the delay and then hasten the work. Weddings were usually held at night. The Brahmin would reach by evening. His meal consisted of fruits. After the function was over, when we gave him his fees and touched his feet, we thought we had achieved salvation. He took what was given, grumbling that it was meagre, and said, '*If this is my fate, so be it.*' He was the purohit for three or four villages and fixed auspicious dates according to his convenience, and without inconveniencing others. The wedding was rarely held at the auspicious time fixed for it. Unless the groom was from our village, the wedding was delayed by some hours. Sometimes the Brahmin did not come on time, sometimes all the relatives of the groom did not arrive in time, sometimes there was a delay in fetching the groom and thus, the auspicious hour was lost. The priest explained that if the time given for the muhurtham given in the horoscope was right, the actual delay could be condoned.

Kunti Rehman was my friend. His house was in the bazaar next to ours. They were from the Dudekula (Muslim weaver) community. They were Dudekula in name only; they were skilled

in selling logs of neem and tumma, and ate only if they earned something everyday. Some of them went from village to village, making and selling castor oil in small tins. Castor was pounded, boiled, and the oil floating on the top was skimmed off. Rahman had a good voice and sang well. He also studied well. To help his family eke out their livelihood, he went to nearby villages selling castor oil or cutting wood.

There were about 20 Muslim houses of whom some had agricultural land. Since these were marginal holdings, the families too hired themselves out for agricultural labour.

Shaikchand who was two years older than me, was a good companion. He was good at studies. He learnt to smoke beedies when he was young. He puffed at a bidi three or four times, stubbed it out and relit it later. He smoked two or three bidies every day. In his company, I took a pull or two, but developed a racking cough and never went near a beedi again. Shaik Chand's father was a Muslim elder. He was very devout and had the reputation of being a man of integrity, but a fundamentalist. They wore new clothes on the days of their festivals and prayed. They had only two or three festivals a year. Two Muslim households worked as carpenters and blacksmiths. They had a towering neem tree in front of their house under which crowds gathered when it rained.

In front of the Kota maisamma temple were the Sairollu households. They had lands and wells to the east of the village. When Sairi Venkulu took his cattle out for grazing, he walked along, playing the nadaswaram. Holes were made in a small dried bottle gourd, two bamboo sticks fixed to this, and holes drilled into the sticks. When he blew on it, the sound of a nadaswaram emerged. When we heard the sound, we knew where Sairi Venkulu was. I too tried to blow into the instrument, but failed to produce a note.

Gongura, green brinjals and cherry tomatoes grew around wells which people plucked in the morning and carried around in baskets through the bazaar for sale. Usually, half a seer paddy was exchanged for a measure of vegetables. If we cooked a curry, it was a meat curry. Usually, we ate our meal with roasted and powdered chilli spiced with garlic, spiced powder of cucumber seeds and mango pickle. Sometimes, there was a tamarind or horsegram broth. Guggillu were always useful as snacks. Creepers in yards bore cucumber and bottle gourd and cucumber was also raised among the jowar crop. Some were dried and used in curries.

We never cooked eggs. My mother gathered these carefully and hatched them and the chicks that were not eaten by crows and vultures survived.

Opposite the door of our courtyard were the houses of two Goundlas. They were brothers, but their women quarrelled every day. My people never drank these Goundlas' toddy, because they felt that it was diluted. Vodderollu and Dommarollu came there in the evening to drink. They got high on the diluted toddy, drinking all evening, and quarreling among themselves. After abusing and falling on each other, they drank again and returned to their houses, still drinking. This was a sight in the bazaar.

Goundlas left their houses at the crack of dawn, went to the toddy trees and returned with

their pots full by the time the sun was up. They went again in the noon to fasten pots to the trees, and by sunset time, took these down again. Many people did not drink the morning's toddy as it was sweet. Goundlas mixed this with the evening's toddy and sold it. The evening's toddy was intoxicating and that's what people drank. One drink, and they picked up quarrels at home, saying that the curry was not good, children were not obedient - they needed no excuse for a quarrel. As long as there was toddy, this was the situation. There was peace when the toddy season was over.

*Relatives have come to my house,
If your toddy is good, I will come tomorrow to your house
I have nothing to eat today
If I have toddy, it will fill my stomach*

After the skirmishes with the razakars and military action, a bus running on coal plied between Suryapet and Miryalaguda. From Suryapet via Durajpalli went the main road to Singareddipalem. It was 10 am when the bus reached our village. After going to Miryalguda, it returned again by 4 pm in the evening, from where it left for Suryapet. The aged and those otherwise incapacitated got onto this bus to go to Suryapet. Those who were strong found it more convenient to walk. There was a box in the rear of the bus into which coal was dropped. The bus ran on the steam produced by the burning coal. There was a man to continuously stir up the fire with an iron rod. The rear of the bus had cinema posters pasted on them. We knew what movies were showing in Suryapet by them. After my villagers went to Suryapet in bullock carts to watch 'Gunasundari Katha' and 'Balraju', there was no other talk except of cinema.



There were two cinema theatres in Suryapet. If there was a good movie showing, the hall filled

easily. One of the theatres was Jai Hind Talkies. It was not a pucca hall. Tarpaulin tents were put up, hence people called it the touring talkies. Bullock carts were tethered all around the theatre. The other was Krishna Talkies. After the movies caught peoples' fancy, saris and blouses were named after them, the Malapalli sari, the Gunasundari blouse, and the like.

There were four to five Balija houses near the Vodlolla bazaar, from where they carried sacks of bangles to the surrounding villages and returned by evening.

*Oh Bangle Brother
good bangles, oh Bangle Brother
the bangles tinkle, oh Bangle Brother
my soul beats in rhythm, oh Bangle Brother
you go to every vada, oh Bangle Brother
do come to mine, oh Bangle Brother.*

Shivaratri was the big festival of the Balijas. They kept lamps lit all night, and took a procession through the village, singing bhajans. They tied oil soaked rags to the end of iron rods with which they pierced their cheeks. They lit the cloth and danced the Siva tandavam in ecstasy. They even had their tongues pierced and looked really demoniac. They danced, chanting `Siva Siva, Sharabha, sharabha, assharabha.' Small children stayed far away, terrified at the sight which lasted through the night.

The Budiga Jangams lived near Ravulapenta where there were many palm trees because they liked to make sure it was close to where toddy was easily available. Besides, all day, they wove mats of palm leaf, and went around selling them. Sometimes they begged, sometimes they put up *tolu bommala aatalu* (leather puppet shows). Once a year, they visited our village, put up two or three shows and left. The leather puppet show `Hanumant's story' was very appealing. They also showed that portion of the Ramayana that told the Vali – Sugriva story.

A white cloth was tied as a curtain; the puppets were fastened to bamboo canes and made to dance to rhythm in the light from torches. Both men and women sang to the beat of drums and cymbals, and to the accompaniment of instruments like the harmonium. The show started late at night and went on till dawn. Intermittently, comic characters like Ketigadu and Bangarakku had the audience falling apart in laughter. Most people came to watch the comic action. Both Bangarakka and Ketigadu used the choicest of innuendoes. Look at this,

*My husband has gone to Suryapet
I have no company
Bear me company till dawn, oh lover
Look at the blossoms on the tamarind tree
Look at my youth
Look at your reflection in the mirror
And see how well we match*

In the morning, the artistes went to the houses of village elders, begged for grain and put up

huts on the waste land by the side of the village where they stayed for a week, staging their shows.



Once, a Muslim girl carrying a baby, attended with four others, saying that they would put up a burrakatha. Wondering how a young girl could stage a burrakatha, the village elders contributed money for a show in the village. This was the eighth wonder in the village – a girl in a show. Benches were laid outside the patel's house for the stage, and the burrakatha began. People came in uncommonly large numbers. The girl was beautiful. In the light of the lanterns, she shone in her colourful clothes. We had never seen a woman on the stage before. Two people sang the chorus. The girl, with anklets and strumming a tampura, started singing the story of the Rani of Jhansi, Lakshmibai. The story was riveting, interspersed by a crude comedy by the chorus players. Villagers enjoyed a show only if it was crude. Everybody laughed. As the girl sang the story, whirling like a top, her depictions of the scenes of heroism continued to fascinate us. The show went on till midnight. All the villagers were happy. I remembered this show for a long time.

There were roads leading to the villages nearby: pathways on which one could walk on and others for carts to travel. If paddy-laden bullock carts had to go to Suryapet, they went slowly from our village up the bumpy Durajpalli road which had become deeply rutted by bullock tracks and during the rainy season, many a cart-wheel got stuck in the ruts. We had heard that a government road had been sanctioned from Durajpalli to Penbad, the village next to ours, and to extend this to our village, we decided to extend free labour. Those who had carts fetched granite and red mud. Those who had no carts sent one person per household to spread the granite and mud. From my house, it was I who was sent to work for two days. This is how the Penbad road was built though government did not sanction a road to our village for a long time.

Villagers celebrated Korla Punnam⁹⁰ with spicy dumplings. Cereals of different kinds were powdered, and the paste made into balls and steamed. In the evening, everyone had to bite into one dumpling and then give it to a dog. The next step was to wash our mouths and eat the other dumplings. That day, dogs were in some demand!

In summer time when the mid afternoon heat became unbearable, we went to the bazaar behind ours to shelter beneath the neem tree there. Kapollu twisted ropes, my people tied the ends of yarn.

Wielding the sitara, the Budiga Jangam, man and wife, would approach us, , 'We will tell you a story. If it pleases you, give us alms.' They would go on to sing the Balanagamma tale, Kambhoja Raja tale or the Bobbili tale. The husband played the sitara and accompanied this with sounds from the rings on his hand. He told the story while his wife played the burra and chimed in with the chorus. If they had a young one with them, they brought food for the baby, sang it a lullaby and put it to sleep. The song went on till dawn. Mothers and sisters nearby stayed up to see it. Balanagamma's sorrows ended with her being released from the magician Mayala Fakeeru's jail by her son Balavaddiraju who killed Mayala Fakeeru. Mothers and sisters could be seen wiping their tears. The weeping women spectators went home and returned with some paddy for the performers. The Jangam couple blessed everyone, praised the village and the bazaar, reached the Goundla's house (for toddy) in the evening and later went back to their hut.

Fakir Sahib was the entertainer with the dancing bear. He was comically dressed in a lungi, with a towel around his head, a coat on top of his shirt, and a bag on his shoulder. Children always followed the bear as Fakir Sahib went from house to house with his dancing bear with a boy for company. The bear's mouth was muzzled and it would, if instructed with a wave of stick, stand up on its hind feet. If small children were feverish, a hair was plucked from the bear, placed in an amulet, mantras chanted before being tied on the child. If fastened about the waist⁹¹, it was believed that the fever would disappear. Fakir Sahib charged separately for this.

⁹⁰ Full moon which occurs in summer

⁹¹ All Telangana Hindu males wore a waist thread, the molatadu, from birth to death. Amulets were tied to this.



My mother was worried because her second son had no children. She took my sister-in-law to Mangalagiri to sleep there⁹². Someone told her that she should take her to Aravapalli too where my aunt resided. My mother did so and had her stay there one night. She made her perambulate temples and prostrate in wet clothes. Whatever she tried, no children were born. When a medicine man came to our village, she went along with the others and brought back medicines. Even this did not work. Watching all this, my father got irritated and said, 'Are you mad that you think that all these will get them children? The husband leaves his wife, chases this woman and that, roaming all over while his wife sits in the house. Can children be conceived by chanting mantras or going to temples? If they stay together, she will conceive.'

I joined class 3 in the government school. Till then no teacher had taken the trouble to teach me systematically. There was always some disturbance or the other. Nazarsahab came to inspect our school. Rangaiah sir came to know about this a day earlier and told us to make sure we attended the next day after a bath and in clean, washed clothes. He warned us, 'When I ask you to recite the multiplication tables and poems, only Neela Ramamurthy should respond.' 'Yes, Sir,' we all replied.

⁹² It was the belief that if childless women slept one night in a particular place, they would conceive.

As expected, Nazarsahab arrived on his rounds. After inspecting classes 1 and 2, he came to our class. Rangaiah Sir told him that the class 3 children knew their multiplication tables and poems well.

‘So you ask them yourself,’ said Nazarsahab.

Rangaiah Sir picked up a stick and asked, ‘*What is 6 x 8?*’

He looked at each of us and indicated to Neela Ramamurthy with his stick.

48, Sir. Ramamurthy replied

‘*How much is 12 x 4?*’ Everyone raised their hands. Rangaiah Sir went past everyone with his stick and again stopped at Neela Ramamurthy. ‘*48, Sir,*’ he said. There was logic behind this. The answer to both questions was 48. Similarly, it was Ramamurthy who read out the poems. Watching this, Nazarsahab understood how Rangaiah Sir was teaching us. ‘Enough,’ he said angrily. Rangaiah Sir came in only twice or thrice a week. The rest of the time it was the chaprasi who supervised us. This was all the education we received.

Cheruku Ramulu, a young teacher of 22 years or so from a nearby village was appointed as our new headmaster. He was a rather short man. Since he was from our caste, we gave him the house newly built for our brother, on rent which he occupied with his wife. I was always in their part of the house. Earlier, he had worked at Chilpakunta. Since he taught well, 7 or 8 students from Chilpakunta had followed him to our village to join our school. Now it was clear to everyone how good this teacher was if his students followed him here from another village. These students lived with their teacher who looked after them as he would, his younger brothers.

He wrote well, his letters like pearls, and taught us also to write likewise. He recited poems musically. As for matters other than teaching, our former teacher had beaten us more than he had taught. Ramulu Sir taught us Jandhyala Papaiah Shastri’s Pushpavilapam poems and Pandavodhyoga Vijayalu. He had a melodious voice and a good ear for music. He accompanied us in the morning to the motabavi for a swim. We brushed our teeth with twigs from the banyan tree. He taught us yoga postures. Thus began my interest in music and literature. He had another good quality. In those days, children’s names were crude. He changed names in the attendance register - Papiiah became Prakasam, Saidaiah, Sadashivudu, Maisaiah, Maheswaram. Parents were also happy and the number of school-going children increased. He also taught in his house after school hours and we children soon lost our fear of school.

On holidays when he was free, Cheruku Ramulu used to tell us about his life and experiences.

‘I stayed in the Arya Samaj hostel in Hyderabad. At that time, I attended meetings of the Andhra Mahasabha and the Communist Party. I was in class ten when the Razakars became active. I wanted to work in the Sangam along with my friend Pasunuru Venkat

Reddy, and both of us went to Suryapet to meet the BN Reddy dalam⁹³. BN Reddy took me to Palakurti, a village in old Suryapet along with Balemla activists. Visnur Ramachandra Reddy's rowdies came with spears and rifles to stop labourers from entering Ailamma's lands. Ailamma rose like a tigress, tucked her pallu into her waist and picked up a sickle, 'Who are you to try to prevent me from harvesting crops on my own lands?' She challenged them to come forward. We were all with Ailamma and watched how the rowdies fled at Ailamma's challenge. The police captured BN Reddy and Yadgiri Rao and tortured them. They even stuffed chilli powder up the anus. In those days, a lullaby was fashioned on Chakali Ailamma.

*Under Nizam rule, uyyallo, in Nalgonda district, uyyallo,
In Jangaon taluk, uyyallo, in Visnur village, uyyallo,
That bastard landlord, uyyallo, what did he do? uyyallo,
In Palakurti, uyyallo, Vetti Chakallamma⁹⁴, uyyallo,
She set up a sangam, uyyallo, she was the sangam herself, uyyallo
All the sangham leaders, uyyallo, were her sons, uyyallo*

We trained people for a few weeks in Old Suryapet on how to confront and tackle the police. Self defence squads were set up in every village, but we were getting arrested and could not move freely in the villages. We went underground. They shot people like birds if they suspected they were Communists. Pasunur Venkat Reddy who left his studies when I did, died in the struggle. This song is about him.

*Oh, Red soldier Venkat Reddy, the revolutionary salute to you
You fought the Nizam's discriminatory rule,
You confronted the demons
Some mother hid you under the eaves of her hut from the mounted attack
they found you and shot you dead
we cannot stem her grief
you were like a mountain but you collapsed*

'I had left my tenth class halfway, but there were no cases against me. I applied at the Nalgonda's DEO'S office and was appointed as a teacher. This is the story of my struggle.'

Elections were held when I was in class 4. People from Suryapet came and wrote on our walls

Vote for the plough oxen

Vote for the hand

Vote for the elephant.

They wrote in lime water on red walls and with red dye on white washed walls. Elections were

⁹³ An armed squad of the Communists

⁹⁴ Like the Madigas, the washerpeople, Chakalis, also had to give free labour. Here Chakali Ailamma is called Vetti Chakallamma

a new development.

The Communist partymen did not contest in the name of their party..They asked people to vote for their symbol, the hand. Congress partymen campaigned on their own symbol, the plough oxen. Apart from these two, another party canvassed with the elephant as its symbol. Every day, activists from some party came to the village and led their processions, shouting slogans. The Communists asked people to defeat the Congress and vice versa. They fought against each other with no holds barred. Then came the day of polling. Every party distributed polling chits. My school had holidays for two days, as the school was the site for the polling booth.

Symbols were pasted on the polling boxes for whoever wanted to vote for a particular symbol, to drop his vote in its respective box. Voting went on peacefully. The polling boxes were taken to Suryapet and school reopened the next day. The Communist party won both the Assembly and Parliament seats.

I had mentioned earlier that my younger uncle Chandraiah had gone to Mangalagiri, did I not?. After he left, we knew nothings of his whereabouts. One day, his wife, my aunt came visiting with their son. It was 20 years since they had left and we couldn't recognize her. Face, form and language had altered completely. My parents and my other uncles finally recognized them. They had never attended any function of ours, neither had we gone to their place.

`At last, here we are,' she wept. `After we went to Mangalagiri and wove at the looms there, life went along well enough. At the time we left, our two sons also worked with us. One day, without telling anyone, my husband ran away with the woman next door. She had no children. Where could we search for them? A year passed and then two. I ran a small hotel, and also made snacks. This ran well. I tightened my belt, bore every difficulty, raised my children and got them married when they came of age. I gradually purchased an old house and ran a hotel in front of it. We are living well enough.'

`A week ago, your brother returned. He was skin and bones. I could not recognize him. When I did, I wept. It seems he was living in Vijayawada with the woman he had run away with, pulling a pushcart for a living. He fell ill with tuberculosis; when the doctors told him that he would not live long, he returned to me, saying that he wanted to see all of us one last time. I took him to the hospital, they said that he would not survive. Not knowing what to do, I came here,' she wept.

My parents and uncles wept on hearing this, *'Even though you left, were we not living here? We did not know your whereabouts.'*

There is a saying, *`Believe a prostitute and ruin your health,'*

They continued to weep.

My aunt was prettier than my mother. We could not understand how and why her husband had left her for their neighbour, and how he could have stayed away for twenty years without

ever wanting to see his wife and children. My father and uncles left with my aunt for Mangalagiri and my uncle was able to see them before he died. He was cremated there and my father and uncles made another trip for his funeral rites.

I passed my fourth class in Anantaram, spending my time singing and dancing. If I had to study class V, I would have to go to Suryapet. Now, staying there was a problem because my brother Sattena who was in Potlapadu, had quarrelled with girls there, left the village and settled in Suryapet. After he agreed to feed me, my father let me go there.

In the meanwhile, my brothers separated. All of them had children and their responsibilities had increased. There were fewer people who wanted cloth woven and the land we had produced only enough to eat. My mother and sister-in-law hired themselves out as farm labourers whenever there was weeding, transplanting and harvesting and earned just enough to feed us.

Weeding and transplantation from ten in the morning till five in the evening were very burdensome to women. It was literally backbreaking work. Employers paid per acre of work, and the labourers shared the earnings. They sang to forget their fatigue. One woman sang, the others rang out the chorus.

*Sisters were given to one village
Only one brother, but he does not come to see us
The seven petalled blossoms of cotton were weighed
and taken to the weaver
the weaver wove it slowly
my sister in law wore the sari
went to the well to fetch water
the ducks gathered and tore the borders of the sari*

Mothers of infants returned home to breastfeed their babies. If they were late, the toddlers could be seen weeping at the doorstep. Older people and young girls looked after the babies. After feeding the baby, the mother returned to work. When they returned home in the evening, they brought back thorny branches of bushes that ringed the fields for the cooking fire. The meal for that night was cooked with these. The grains that were paid for the day's labour lasted for a few days.

My elder brother was used to bossing everybody else. Apart from weaving, he knew nothing. The brother younger to him had slowly learned to work on the sewing machine. He went to Dosapadu, stitched all day and returned home in the evening. It was difficult to run the house because my father was no longer able to work and the house began collapsing due to the rains. The Sairollu had purchased an old house in the bazaar and had started selling salt, chilli, tobacco, beedi, etc. there. They brought all their wares from a trader in Talla Khammapadu. When these were exhausted, they went to fetch some more. The Madiga hamlet was near our house. Madigas went for agricultural labour, returned home in the

evening and exchanged their day's wage of paddy for oil, salt, onions and tobacco. Every purchase was made with paddy. My mother started selling these essentials. No transactions were made with cash. It was either paddy or jowar. When the groundnut harvest came in, the exchange was with groundnuts. People gave whatever grain they had to purchase essentials.

I was good friends with Shaikh Chand. I was younger than him but on easy terms, calling him 'Hey, you!' and not using the respectful form of address. He too behaved with me in a similar fashion. He told me about the happenings in the Peta school. I heard him out in wonder and joy. In the term 'Hey, you', is great empathy, greater than in any other form of address. Even if someone was older than me, if I considered him to be my friend, I would say 'Hey, you.' They too addressed me in a similar fashion. Shaikh Chand and Bhagwanth Reddy were in one batch. Bhagwanth Reddy's elder brother Narayan Reddy and Onteddu Raghava Reddy were students of the same batch and were in class 9 at that time. All four studied in Peta. Apart from them, another two, Lakshma Reddy and Matta Reddy studied upto class X. Unable to pass class X, they applied for teaching posts and succeeded. They were struggling to pass their class X exams while working.

There were two more people in our village, Shaikh Chand's father and another, Vedantam, who worked as teachers. Another two, the Dora's son Ranga Rao worked as a teacher, and his brother Seshagiri Rao worked in the Revenue Department. Apart from them, it must be said that no one else was educated. Another son of the Dora was an advocate in Peta but died in a train accident.

We were about ten of us who were getting ready to join class V in Peta when the schools re opened. After joining, how many would remain and how many would slip and fall by the wayside, one did not know.

PART 4

The world is a flood
Life is a never-ending struggle

The high school in Suryapet is next to the police station. Opposite the high school was the government hospital and next to that, the middle school. This was a private building.

I, Rehman, Malli Reddy, Narsi Reddy, Chittepu Bhiksham Reddy, Kodi Ramulu, we were six of us who joined in class V. Lessons began in July. Class V was divided into three sections. I was in A section, some were in B and some others in C. Everything was new for us with the commotion of strange children. Our school was on the edge of the town, after which was a rocky outcrop on which they had built the cooperative bank.

It took a whole month for children to settle down. There were no lessons during this period. Getting to know each other, exchanging jokes, fighting – that was how the hours went by. Lessons began slowly. Venkateswara Rao was our class teacher. He used to teach us Telugu, Subba Rao taught us English, Swami taught us science, and Ram Reddy, Mathematics. Ram

Reddy would say, 'Mister, hey, Mister, did you understand?' We nodded in affirmation. He wrote sums on the board to show us. The cleverer children sat in the front row benches. Middle-of-the-roaders like me sat in the fourth or fifth row. With me sat Ramakrishna Reddy who wore his brother's vests. He used to stammer, but was kindhearted. Lakshmanachari was a tall boy. His brother had a jewellery shop. He wore good clothes to school. Gali Ramachandraiah was a year older than me. He wore a half-shirt and knickers. Lacchaiah was the same age as I. The five of us settled on one bench. Lakshmanachari and Lacchaiah were residents of Suryapet. Ram Reddy was from Solipet. We often understood him only by sign language as he had a bad stammer and found speech difficult. If anyone made fun of him, we threatened them. Lakshmanachari excelled in games. Ramachandraiah and I were middling, Lacchaiah was backward. If any of us had doubts, we consulted each other.

In the first bench were Somi Reddy, Madhusudan Reddy, Radhakrishna, Pandurangachari, all younger than us by a year, but who studied well. I used to score well in Mathematics and Telugu and was middling in others. I and Pandurangachari became good friends. A trader's son Arjun, a good student, was very good looking. I became friends with him and sometimes went to his house which was near the mosque by the graveyard. When I visited them, his mother served us snacks and pakodas. Sometimes I gave them to him.

School was tolerable. I stayed with my elder brother. Some of our villagers had taken a house near Krishna talkies and cooked there. I joined them, studied and slept there. When Saturday came, I reached Anantaram by evening, spent Sunday there and made my way back to Suryapet in the early morning of Monday, a walk of two hours.

After classes were over, I went to the ground to watch games. I played kabaddi with my friends for some time. Football, volleyball and hockey were not games I was allowed to join in nor did I know the first things of these games. Lakshmanachari played football well. Another boy, Shivaiah was short, but when he picked up the hockey stick, he moved faster than a beetle. He pushed the ball this way and that, did not allow anyone near it till he got it to the goal. Both Lakshmanachari and Shivaiah excelled in sports.

High school boys dominated the middle school boys. Sometimes they took out processions or conducted strikes. Vempati Raghav Reddy studied in class VIII. He was a Communist, the secretary of our union and a good public speaker. We wondered when we too would be able to speak in public. My year in Class V passed in no time at all.

I stayed at home all summer. I stood guard over the paddy seedlings. When stocks ran low in our shop, I went to nearby Khammampadu and fetched more. Shaikh Chand and I went to the outskirts of the village every day and gossiped idly.

So I came to class VI. My sister-in-law said that she would not cook for me and since my brother's writ did not run in that house, I began eating at Sivamma's hotel near Bodrai in the Big bazaar, paying Rs.10 every month along with a measure of rice for a room rented in that house. There were four of us from our village. The room admitted no light and had no ventilation, being like a dark tunnel. At a rent of Rs. 5 per month, each of us paid Rs.1.25.

Shivamma's cooking was tasty enough. At my brother's house, there was just one curry served with buttermilk or charu⁹⁵. Here, I had two curries, pickles and charu. I liked the food. Students of classes IX and X, older youth and even married men ate at Sivamma's. I used to wonder how such old people sat in class and studied!

Our union leader Raghav Reddy also ate here. He told us about Communism and took the four of us to Dharma Bhiksham.⁹⁶ Bhiksham asked us how we fared, from where we hailed, and then placed his hand on my arm, *'Arre, so you are Satyam's younger brother.'* I felt proud. He told us, *'You must study well and also agitate for certain causes'*. Raghav Reddy told him that we were all with them (the Communists). We talked for some time and left.

Raghav Reddy then told us, *'Earlier, the school was only upto class VII here. There were no places for students from villages to stay here. In 1946, Dharma Biksham ran a hostel to address the issue. Many boys stayed here and studied.'*

'We had to pay Rs.5 and 1 measure of rice and got both food and a place to stay. Once, when some students from richer families were reluctant to wash their plates, Dharma Biksham washed their plates himself, shaming them. Thereafter, they washed their plates themselves.'

We asked how Dharma Biksham got his name. He replied, *'Once Raja Bahadur Venkatrami Reddy came as chief guest for a meeting arranged in the hostel. Pleased at the way the hostel ran, he spoke of Bommagani Bhiksham as 'Dharma' Biksham. Since then, he has been called Dharma Biksham. He led a struggle against the Yerrabadu deshmukh. He fought to raise the wages of workers in the Suryapet mills. He is always agitating on the issues of the Goundlas. He has no wife or children. The movement is his very life breath. He is ready to help, whenever we go, even if it is late at night.'*

I was very pleased to have met such a great man and often visited him later.

The wells in Suryapet had brackish water, so everyone fetched water from outside the town. Every morning and evening, we saw women with pots in groups of four or five, chatting as they walked. Some women made a living, fetching water for others. Since we could not bathe every day, we washed our faces with the salty water.

There was no electricity at that time so we studied by the light of small lamps. All I had to do was to place my book in front of me and I'd fall asleep immediately. I had only two sets of clothes. We went to the tank near the town once in two or three days, bathed there and washed and dried our clothes.

I had mentioned our ill-ventilated rooms. Well, there were an incredible number of bugs in it, making it difficult to sleep at night. The bugs bred in the holes in the walls made for nails and under the ropes of cots.⁹⁷ They bred under the tapes of the cots, in chairs and benches. They

⁹⁵ The Telangana counterpart of rasam, usually made without lentils, sometimes with tamarind, mango or buttermilk

⁹⁶ Dharma Biksham was a legendary Communist fighter of these parts, a man of rare integrity.

⁹⁷ Cots with ropes woven into the frame were common in South India. These were lighter, could be stacked against a wall and were called navar cots

sucked blood at night and reached their shelters by morning. Our clothes were streaked with blood where we had scratched. It was the woe of every house. The streetlights in Suryapet were all lanterns that emitted a feeble wavering light.

Municipal elections were scheduled and the election campaign grew hectic. The Burrakatha dalam of Suddala Hanmantu came to Suryapet. Every day, there was a moving burrakatha in the bazaar. The man (Hanumanth) was reedy but his voice was rich and resounding. Turban on his head, tamera on his arm and gripping the chirutalu used by burrakatha artists, he lost himself in the episodes of bravery. Two people sounded the chorus and cracked jokes in an interesting fashion. I remember a small song:

*Tell me whether it is right or wrong
is it dictatorship or feudalism
you told us the srirangam neetulu⁹⁸ and got elected
you showed us heaven in your palm
during independence you told us to stay away from the white people
later, you joined the Commonwealth killers
what a strange thing this is
you used us when you wanted is and then discarded us
you brought us a famine never seen before
whoever raised their voices, you shot them*

Till the elections were over, Suddala Hanmantu enacted a burrakatha every day in the bazaar. Another great song which he sang was

*Village boy
Grazing cattle
How long is it since you were weaned?
Oh milky-cheeked farmhand
How long is it since you were employed?
your shirt is small and torn, the cold wind biting you
you took a jute sack and put it on
did you count the holes in the shirt?
the red flag that stands to support us all, helps to fill the stomach of the hardworking
Do you say that this should fly on the Red Fort?
And that the regime of oppression should end?*

Dr. Swamy was elected Municipal Chairman in that election.

The bus stand in Suryapet was in front of the Gandhi park where big meetings were held. The traders' association office was in this park. Adjacent to Gandhi park was the dak bungalow.⁹⁹ When important people visited, they stayed here. Next to it was the post office. About three or

98 Sreerangam neetulu refers to what is preached but never practised

99 An institution peculiar to the British colonials who constructed handsome buildings of a particularly uniform pattern all over India as rest houses for themselves

four RTC buses going to Hyderabad and Nalgonda buses halted at the bus stand. The other, the coal-fed bus ran mostly to Jaggaiahpet. Some went past villages to Miryalagudem. The bus cleaner would shout 'Jaggaiahpet, Jaggaiahpet, Miryalgudem, Miryalgudem.' It was difficult for newcomers to make out his cries. There were also buses to Jangaon, but only one or two. People from nearby villages always walked when they had to come to Suryapet.



There was a huge neem tree at the bus stand beneath which was N.G.Reddy's bookstall. It really wasn't a shop. Books were spread over sacking on the ground. The shop was called Star Book House. Russian publications, Soviet Land, almanacs, Yakshaganam, Burrakatha and booklets with cinema songs were sold here. In the shade of the same neem tree was Rehman's pan shop. The brass pots containing kasu and lime shone. Those who chewed pan or smoked cigarettes bought their stuff here and stood for a while, watching the passersby.

Sometimes, herbalists brought their wares to the empty ground near the neem tree, spread their wares out with a red ribbon as boundary. One spoke in Urdu with his translator shouting in Telugu:

*Look, sir
We have brought this medicine from the forest
If you have burning urine
It will heal with this medicine
If you have any disease
Use our medicine
We guarantee it.*

As he said this, he ground some herbs, poured the mixture into a glass and asked a couple of

by-standers to drink it free of cost. After this, some others came forward to buy the medicines.

One crore arts – all to fill the stomach

The centre of Suryapet was the Bodrai Bazaar with big cloth shops, kirana (grocery) shops and a goldsmith's shop. The Big Bazar led to the mosque but which were the godowns. Nearby was the PWD office and others.

On the way to Krishna Talkies, past the four-pillared temple were the paddy dehusking rooms. Past these were the huts of the Yerukulas¹⁰⁰. Two paces ahead was Krishna Talkies. Near the theatre were the rice and oil mills.

Shivamma's house where we stayed was near Bodrai Bazar's ragi (peepal) tree and the boddurai¹⁰¹. There was a bhajan temple here where every evening, people sang

Oh! Look at the condition of the world

How man has changed

The sun has not changed nor has the moon but man has changed

The routine started with this and went on to devotional songs by Ghantasala. Every Saturday after the bhajan was over, pulihora¹⁰² was given as prasadam¹⁰³. Every morning, Venkateswara suprabhatam¹⁰⁴ started at 5 am. There were special pujas during festivals and celebrations. Traders' houses surrounded the temple. They were very religious.

Nearby were kirana shops. After them came the goldsmiths in whose shops were framed pencil sketches of Gandhi, Nehru and Bose. I looked at them every day on my way to school. There was a lane after this where Mangali¹⁰⁵ Gopal made flower decorations for festival and wedding chariots in his shop. These lovely decorations were sometimes shaped like a swan, or like an eagle or like a flying chariot. He always had ten different designs ready.

Weddings in wealthy homes were celebrated for five days. On each of the five days, the bride and groom were taken around the village in a new and different chariot. Along with a band, and in the light of petromax lamps leading the procession, the chariot seemed as if it had descended from the skies. Seated in the chariot between the bride and groom were happy little children. The chariot, tied to a jeep, was taken around the village till late in the night. Only the very rich or traders could afford such displays and among them, this procession was mandatory.

100 The second largest of the nomadic de-notified tribes of Andhra Pradesh, criminalised during colonial rule

101 In those days, a rock stood to mark the centre of the town from where measurements were made. In Telugu, boddu is the navel (centre) and rai is stone. Hence boddurai.

102 Rice spiced with tamarind

103 The food offering made to the deity and then distributed among devotees

104 The traditional south Indian Hindu upper caste morning devotional song sung to Balaji of Tirupati

105 Of the barber caste

Jai Hind Theatre was showing the play, *Chintamani*. I had no money for a ticket, but wanted to see the play. My friends had told me that the comic portions of the play were good. In my desperation to see the play, I searched everywhere, found a four anna piece, and went to the gate where the gatekeeper allowed entry for only ticket holders. I knew the play had begun when I heard songs being sung. I went slowly upto the gate and said, ` *Annayya*, elder brother, I have only four annas. Take this and let me in.' The gatekeeper asked me to wait, and let me in when no one was around. At that time, the character Subbichetti was entering the stage. The dialogue between Chintamani's mother and Subbichetti made everyone laugh. The hall was rocking. In his role as Shankarudu, the actor recited many poems.

*I sold our ancestral lands
gave these to you with both hands
I sold to my cousins, the house that my father built
and made ornaments for you
the mango orchard given by my inlaws
I wrote in your name
I took my wife's ornaments, including her mangalsutra
and gave them to you.
My elders said I should not
my wife threatened suicide
Yet I continue to chase you like a dog
Like a lover, always waiting
Such is my fate*

There was a big ground behind our school. One could play football, hockey, kabaddi, volleyball and other games in that enormous space. Gemini circus came to town. Huge shamianas, lions, tigers, elephants, camels and monkeys were brought here in lorries. It took a week to put up the tents. I had never seen these animals earlier. As soon as school was over, I went there. In the meanwhile, they took the elephants and camels around the town. These animals twisted and stretched around and ate the leaves of the trees on the road, advertising the presence of the circus in town. Along with them were clowns wearing strange clothes pushing their carts before them.

All that week, we went to the shamianas after school and watched the circus crowd. At last the show began. There were shows both during the day and at night. School children were given 50% concession on Saturdays. I went along with my friends to the circus, a magic world. Inside huge shamianas, lights blazed even in the day. The sound of the band resounded across the hall. First came the buffoon. Then the lions and tigers went around. Dogs jumped through hoops. The elephant stood on a small stool. A woman put her head into the lion's yawning mouth. As a man cycled, about ten people, including children, jumped, one on top of the other, all on the cycle. The buffoons appeared at intervals, making people laugh. They also performed feats on the cycle. One of them threw three or four rings into the air at great speed, and caught all of them. Not one ring fell to the floor. One man went round and round on his motorcycle inside a globe. We feared that he would fall and die. Terrifying music accompanied this. Then came the trapeze. A big net was tied below. At each corner were acrobats holding

onto swings. While swinging, they went from one corner to the other. Then came the girls. Wearing tiny pants and tiny vests, they looked very strong. They swung on the trapeze. At the end, all of them swung down, one by one, and fell into the net. The act was over. I heard that they changed items from show to show. It was pleasure enough to see it once. The circus lingered here for a month and people from villages came in bullock carts to see it.

A performer on a cycle came to the small ground next to our school. He bathed while cycling, dressed while cycling, he cycled on one wheel, raising the other up. He did this all day. Children threw one anna or four paise, and he got some Rs.20.

* * * * *

Kodi Ramulu who came with me to Suryapet and was studying in class VI came down with fever. This was neglected, he developed fits and died. His brother Kodi Dasayya was like an uncle to me. He married a second time when his first wife died. When alive, Ramulu used to weave from the age of 8. When he was studying, he would return home on Saturday and weave all Sunday. Dasayya was unable to work. His wife learnt to use the sewing machine and ran the household, stitching skirts and blouses. As there was no clientele in my village, the family migrated to Narayanaguda in Hyderabad. The house became dilapidated and turned into a pile of garbage and dung.

Rahman stayed for some time with the Reddy boys from the village, and then left. My classmate Yadgiri Rao's father worked as a head constable in the police, and his house was in a lane near Krishna Talkies. Yadgiri Rao had fallen in love with a girl and married her. Those who married for love were looked down upon because people said that the boy had kidnapped the girl. Yadgiri Rao and our Rehman were good friends. When he went to their house, he did whatever work was asked of him. When they asked him to stay with them, he stayed there in a small room and attended school from there. He studied well enough. A smiling face was his greatest asset.

Tanks dried up in summer. We had to look out for tanks to bathe and wash our clothes. The Dora's well lay ahead of Krishna Talkies. It was a big well, lined with stones in the bottom and all along the sides and never ran dry. Many children used to swim in this well including Rahman and Yadgiri Rao. Rehman and I would dive into the well. Why wasn't Yadgiri joining us, why was he standing on the edge of the well? I pushed him into it. He went under and came up again and again, gasping for breath. Rahman shouted that Yadgiri couldn't swim and was drowning. I jumped into the well, caught hold of his shorts and pulled him out, averting a terrible accident. Yadgiri Rao never again accompanied us to swim. Whenever we met, he would say, 'Hey, you wanted to kill me, didn't you?'

*Pagativeshagallu*¹⁰⁶ came from the Andhra region. Small children donned the role of Hanuman, Balakrishna, Lava Kusa. Adults played Rama, Krishna, Ardhanariswara. They went from shop to shop, singing and dancing, accompanied by a harmonium player and players of other supporting instruments. Their songs were musical, their dresses beautiful. Shopkeepers were unable to refuse them and handed out one anna or some paise. They went around town for a week, begging, and then returned. All of them knew music and were beautiful.

Play a crore roles for food (to fill your stomach)

Small children dressed as Lord Krishna looked very good. They bought snacks for an anna or a few paise.

The Kishtamma Cloth Shop was near Boddurai. Besides cloth, one could also get yarn there. The saris and dhotis the shop ordered sold well. The shop owner's wife sat by him. Since they did not trust clerks, they kept a young boy, a distant relative of ours as a clerk. He was both their household help and assistant in the shop. One day, a sadhu came to the shop, looked it over, scrutinized their palms and said that there was hidden treasure in the shop. 'The Goddess claims a youth as sacrifice,' he said and only then would She reveal the treasure, he said. He took his fees and left. Hungry for treasure and unmindful of the cost, they hatched an evil plan. Their assistant was 15 or 16 years old and had no strong family backing. They decided that he would be ideal for their sacrifice, and one night, saying that there was work at the shop, sent for him, did puja, and killed him by crushing his testicles. There was however, no hidden treasure to be found. By morning, the news spread all over town. Claiming that the boy had died of snake bite, the owner of the shop bribed the police and suppressed the case. Such blind superstitions led to human sacrifices.

Peddoji's cloth shop was in Ragichettu bazaar. This was the big cloth shop. Binny cloth could be bought here. Peddoji was an old man, yet sat at the shop. They (he and his community) were called the Rangreez. They spoke Marathi. There was a gate as one went from Pedda bazaar to the Mutharasi bazaar. There were eight houses but no outsider entered the gate. Those were called Peddoji quarters. Important employees of the town stayed here. There were all amenities in these houses. It was prestigious to say that one lived here. Peddoji's grandson Subhas was fair and handsome, he was in my class, but wouldn't speak to us. He looked down upon villagers. His clothes were stiff with starch and ironed. Our clothes were of rough cheap cloth. When our teachers wanted Binny trousers, gabardine or corduroy, they told him. He would tell them that he would get these after a month and do so. If clothes made of materials such as these were ironed, the pleats stayed in place for a week.

As one went by Peddoji cloth shop, one came to more cloth shops and grocery shops. There was also Bejugam Ramaihigari Satyanarayana bookshop. Students got the necessary textbooks and notebooks here. Opposite this was Yama Radhakrishna and Sons medical shop where medicines were available. This was the biggest medical shop in Suryapet. If one went on, the

106 Those who don stage clothes during the day and seek alms in return for a display of music and costume

main road lay both to the east and west. There was a big gate at this crossroad. Next to the gate was Madras Hotel, its owner Narayan Rao. Wearing a white loose shirt, his sleeves folded up, and a white dhoti, vibhuti (holy ash) smeared horizontally on his forehead, he sat at the counter at dawn. This was the big hotel. As one went past the hotel, the delicious aroma of coffee hit you. Narayan Rao had neither wife nor children. He was intimate with a Lambada woman working in his hotel. She ruled as a wife did. After passing this gate, if one went on further, there was another gate. The vegetable market was here. Close by was Dr Sharma's hospital. Dr Sharma was one of the town elders. He had a name as a good doctor. He also had a taste for music and literature. He played a key role in the Thyagaraja festival. He was dark and wore white khadi clothes. Beyond the vegetable market was the meat market. In the lane beyond was Prakash printing press. This was the only printing press in Suryapet. Inside the vegetable market was the office of the Suryapet Taluk Handloom Weavers' Co-operative Society. My brothers purchased yarn at controlled rates here. They also brought their woven cloth here to sell. Thati Ramachandram was the president of the society for a long period. He was not a handloom weaver, but belonged to our community. The society was controlled by rich people.

To the east of the main gate was Naidu's bookshop where you got novels and weeklies. Near this was the watchshop of my friend Krishna. Every day after school, he was at the shop. The main road was called Jaggayyapet road. On that road was the Chandraiah hotel, next to that, deaf Satyam's chappal shop. A little ahead was Mothkur Sriramulu's shop. You could get all kinds of pens here. They also repaired pens here. A little ahead was Jabbar Radio House. Jabbarsahab was thin. He always wore his shirt tucked into his trousers. He spoke English well. He also acted in English dramas along with our teacher Subbarayudu.

I liked people who drew and wrote a round script. MHK sign painter wrote the boards of shops as also the names of shops on walls. He had flowing tresses, wore a silk dhoti and had a stubble. As I went to and fro school, I watched him paint and write on boards. He wrote a good script but drew human beings as if they were demons. After completing the work, he signed it with a flourish, MHK. On the steps were painted small flowers with Camel paints. I liked to speak to people who I saw drawing *muggulu*¹⁰⁷ or leaves. They drew branches and stems in minutes with two colours on one brush; its shades emerged with small or thick strokes of the brush. Red, white, yellow and green were sufficient to bring to life, very many pictures. The painters never had clothes sufficient to cover them. They wore dirty torn clothes.

Kasturi Krishnamurthy was a boy in my class, but in another section. He wrote boards and painted cinema slides. My friends considered him superior. He was a chatterbox and did not study well. He was a loafer as well. I wanted to be friends with him, but this did not happen soon. At this tender age, he was smoking bidis. As he wrote on boards, he always had money in his pocket. After being behind him for some time, he allowed me to watch him while he prepared slides, having made me promise that I would not reveal his secrets to anyone. Later, unable to study, he stopped coming to school.

After the police action in 1948, intelligent weavers from villages landed up in the town. Sensing that weaving would no longer fetch them a living, they shifted to other trades. They knew the trade of yarn since it was part of the trade of cloth. So they entered this. Kasturi's family was one such, from Vallalla village. Kasturi Lakshmaiah had seven sons. They all learnt the techniques of dyeing. Weavers came from villages, had yarn dyed and took it back to their villages. If the weavers came here a few times, they became familiar with the Kasturi family. At lunch or dinner time, the weavers were pressed to eat a meal along with the family. I came now and then for getting yarn dyed when my brothers sent me. *'Hey, you are Venkatagiri's younger brother. Come and eat fruit'*, they would say.' They ate mutton three or four times a week. Or else fish. They never ate without meat of some kind. Lakshmiah bought one acre behind the high school and built seven big houses, one for each of his sons. This was called Kasturi Bazar. As long as the old man was alive, the houses were alive with gaiety and prosperity. After he died, they lost their sheen. Krishnamurthy was his younger son.

The Pendem family migrated to Suryapet from Dugunavalasa. They prospered in the cloth trade. Villagers closer to Suryapet did not migrate. Families who were original inhabitants of Suryapet were the Tati, Mothkur and Surepalli families. A relation of ours had also migrated to Suryapet some time ago. He was Devulapalli Venkaiah. This was the single Devulapalli family; they were neither well-off nor poor.

I once saw a Golla suddulu performance by Narra Raghava Reddy during a Communist party meet at Gandhi park. Raghava Reddy was 30 years old, slightly short. He had Ayodhya and another man as his chorus. Anklets tied to his feet, his dhoti worn in Golla fashion, a scarf tied around his head, a gongadi¹⁰⁸ draped on his arm, he danced and sang and also jumped all around the stage.

*Rama, Rama! Ore Mallanna! Where is Lingaiah! Where are the sheep?
When he shouted, Lingaiah came out shouting, 'Oye!' from the middle of the crowd.
The thieves know the antecedents of the doras
Police know the antecedents of thieves*

He started the ballad saying that the sub-inspector knew the antecedents of both thieves and doras. In another meeting, at another time, he donned the dress of a bluffmaster. He listed the flaws of Government. His speech was powerful and he reeled out Telangana proverbs.

When Communist leader Nandyala Srinivas Reddy from the Nakrekal region came to arrange a meeting, I went to attend along with all my friends. He had already begun speaking. He explained how feudalism ruled in the region before 1940.

"The Cherkupalli deshmukh had lands in about 12 villages of Nalgonda and Miryalagudem

taluqs. He got free toddy from the Goundlas of that village, and one goat every Dasara from that group. Farmers had to plough the dora's fields, according to the number of ploughs they had. Agricultural labourers had to first transplant paddy on the dora's fields, and only then move to the fields of other farmers. During transplantation, they did not allow mothers to leave to breastfeed their babies. The mothers had to express milk from their breasts to prove that they were indeed breastfeeding.

"The Vetti Madigas had to sweep the ground before the Dora's house and sprinkle water and dung. Chakalis had to wash vessels, clothes and press the legs of the women before they slept at night. The Mangalis had to clean the lanterns and light the lamps. If villagers had milch cows and buffaloes, the dora took these over forcibly. Chakalis and Vetti Madigas had to run in front of his bullock cart for miles together. If there were pretty girls in Sudra houses, they were taken by the dora to sexually service him and the male members of his family. During weddings and jatras, women of the family went about in palanquins and Boyas and Chakalis had to carry these. All this was forced (and unpaid) labour.

"When they came to the village, the sanghams stopped this work. This was sthe first victory of the sangham. The sangham brought about consciousness among people," he said.

After this speech was over, women comrades sang about the oppression of the Yerrababu dora,

*In Nalgonda district, uyyallo
there was a village Errababu uyyallo
His name Pratap Reddy, uyyallo
His caste Motata (Reddy) uyyallo
He called labourers, uyyallo
Gave them the grinding stone uyyallo
Sacks of ulavalu, uyyallo
They ground and ground, uyyallo
With sweat dripping off them, uyyallo
They couldn't bear the suffering, uyyallo
they prayed to God, uyyallo
In Pedatallagadda, uyyallo
there was Pedda Mukundaiah, uyyallo
They told him, uyyallo
About the sufferings caused by the dora, uyyallo
the labourers fell at his feet, uyyallo
He tied a rope to the dora's hand uyyallo
Took him to the Peetiri rocks, uyyallo
And shot him there, it seems, uyyallo*

My friend Lakshmanachari's father died but his mother was alive. His brother was Jogaiah. He had a gold shop and knew the work well. His business was making and selling gold ornaments. He had a prosperous house. His brother was rich, wasn't he? Since he ate good

food, he was well-built. Sometimes, I went to their house. I wouldn't go if his brother was there. His brother earned well in trade. He married another girl. There was always trouble in the house. Lakshmanachari was not very happy in this house. He stayed on the grounds till late in the evening with his friends, and only then returned home.

We called him Krishna Reddy but his full name was Mandalreddy Ramakrishna Reddy. He told us that his brother was studying Fine Arts in Hyderabad. He said that he would also join Fine Arts after he passed his HSC. Krishna Reddy read the Andhra Patrika and Prabha weeklies. At that time, it was the habit to add Sri to the name of a writer. Krishna Reddy changed his name to Makarasri. He told us that Ma stood for Mandalreddy, K for Krishna, R for Reddy and Sri added as an honorific. We laughed at this and teased him that though he hadn't written a word, he had changed his name. Krishna Reddy also sketched. He initialled his drawings 'Makarasri.'

Teachers came with canes to the class. Our Telugu teacher Singaracharyulu always beat someone or the other on some pretext. We never knew why he taught less and beat more. Teachers came for all four periods in the morning. Only two teachers came for the three periods in the noon. The last period was the games period. If a teacher did not come for a class, another teacher came. This teacher did not teach, but spoke on some subject, or asked a child to come up and sing. I sang verses from the Pushpa Vilapam or the 'Amma, Sarojini Devi' song by Ghantasala. I liked this song very much.

*Oh, Gurralla Gopi Reddy,
You are buried at Dachepalli,
With heavy silver bangles on you
As you came down the embankment
I thought you were the Collector, son.
Oh, my sweet son,
Oh my beautiful son,
Oh, you are buried at Dachepalli.*

Since I sang, I was known as a singer.

There was a period, 'debate'. They gave us a topic and asked us to speak on it. The topics could be 'Is education necessary for women? Which is more important - wealth or education? Does God exist? One of us took the stand for example, that education was necessary for women and explained why with reasons. Another student refuted this, again with reasoning. This was quite useful. Boys like me got a chance to speak, irrespective of whether we knew anything. Many students were not able to speak. I was stubbornly determined and spoke whatever came to mind. My image improved in class because of this.

Sri Rama Navami was celebrated on a grand scale by erecting a pandal. It was cool in summer under the pandal. The Vartaka Sangham played the main role in the celebrations. There were weeklong functions. Every night, there was either a Harikatha (religious discourse)

burrakatha, musical performance or a Bharata Natyam recital. There were pujas every morning and evening. The festivals were conducted in the Bhanjan temple in Boddurai bazaar near the house where I stayed. In the night, they also gave prasadam.

Surabhi Natak Company began giving performances on our school grounds, erecting shamianas. Theirs was a big troupe. They put up a hall just like a cinema hall. They arranged publicity with mikes and dappu everyday in all of Suryapet. They publicized that they would be playing Balanagamma, Maya bazaar, Srikrishna Leelalu, Bhakta Prahlad, Sati Savitri with settings and with much pomp. I went every day after school, stood by the shamiana along with others and watched the goings – on .

I decided that I must see the play, Sati Savitri. It really felt as if Yama, with a mace on his arm and sitting on a buffalo, was coming to east from Yamaloka. Savitri pleading, Yama Dharmaraju refusing, the dialogue was excellent. Surabhi put up plays for a month. Hordes of people came from villages to watch these. They came with their bullock carts full of sacks of groundnut and paddy, sold these, watched the drama and left at dawn for their villages. The dramas were enacted during Sankranti.

There was a mosque on the way to school from where I lived. A Muslim sold kites near the mosque. These were very attractive, multi-coloured and well designed. Whenever I passed that way, I stopped, gazed at them for some time, asked the price and then moved on.

Trade without buying or eating.

To avoid the shopkeeper getting angry at me for bargaining without buying, I finally purchased one kite for an anna. The kite was very beautiful. It had two eyes and a tail. I had thread which I had brought from my house. I tied this and flew the kite. I was overjoyed. Earlier, when I had flown kites I had made myself, they wouldn't fly high. This one, as I loosened the thread, flew high. Two or three kites came my kite's way. Through I pulled my kite, it wouldn't come down. Another kite cut mine. My kite flew away in the wind. God knows in which tree it got stuck, I searched for a week all over town, and then gave up.

I was saddened when Vishwam Sir who enacted the role of Bal Vaddiraju in Gemini's Balanagamma, and taught at the Suryapet school, was transferred to Khammam. I came to know that Shonti Krishnamurthi who taught in the same school and was a storywriter, also left on a transfer. I managed to get a copy of his book 'Kathalu Rayadamela' (How to write a story) but could not understand all of it.

I was quite addicted to cinema. My brother's brother-in-law was Surepalli Korivi. He was older than me. He wove at the loom. He watched every movie, bought every songbook (of the cinema) and learnt the songs by heart. He worked on the loom, humming one song or the other. When I had no work and was bored, I sat by his loom and heard him relate incidents about cinema. He sang devotional songs well.

*What shall I do, oh Shiva, what shall I do?
I thought I would get water for puja*

*But the frogs and fish in the water
Told me that the water was engili¹⁰⁹
What shall I do, oh Shiva, what shall I do?*

After some time, when he was not able to get a living on the loom, he left for Khammam and settled there. He sold *guggillu*¹¹⁰ at the railway station and earned his livelihood. Once, as he was crossing the railway track, he was hit by a train and died on the spot. This is Korivi's story.

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In Krishna Talkies, after the documentaries were over, as the movie was about to begin, they played the song 'Oho, pavurama' (Oh, dove) sung by Bhanumati. If the song was played, it meant that the movie was to begin. They started with Ghantasala's 'Edukondalavada ekkadunnavura' (Where are you, Lord of the Seven Hills) and the movie started after half an hour. Meanwhile, the hall filled up. There were small hotels in front of Krishna Talkies where hot vadas were fried. Small ones, six for an anna, were very tasty, as were the mirchi bajjis (chilli fritters). The hotel had many customers during the interval.

The film, *Malleshwari* came to town. School students got a concessional ticket every Tuesday. I spent three annas and went to watch it with my friends. I loved it. The songs were very good so I bought a book of songs from the film for an anna and kept it very carefully for a long time. I learnt every song by heart. The songbook also had the story in brief, the names of the characters and the actors. I liked Bhanumati's songs very much. The songbooks brought out by Vijaya Pictures were colourful and all of a particular design and size. In the film, *Aggi Ramudu*, there was a scene of a man walging on a rope from one hill to another. This was exciting. In the same film was Nazar's burrakatha. The other films were *Viporarayana*, *Chakrapani*, and the all-child cast *Baalaaanandam*. Three films were rolled into one - *Burela mookudu*, *Rajayogyam*, *Konte Kistaiah*. When they publicised the film, they said that the entire cast was of made up school children and members of Balaanandam. The other films I liked were *Kanyashulkam*, *Missamma*, *Bangaru Papa* and *Donga Ramudu*.

When the film magazine *Kinnera* came to the school library, we rushed to read it. *Kinnera* brought out a special issue when the film *Chandraharam* was released. The entire issue was about the film. The cover had Savitri lying down in the dark. I thought that this was how angels and goddesses looked. I learnt all the songs of *Devadas* by heart. When friends asked me to sing them, I did so. After this film came *Palleturi Pilla*. People termed it a Communist film as one particular song from it was often sung at Communist meetings.

Batukamma and Dasara were celebrated grandly in Suryapet. They laid layer upon layer of flowers for the Bathukamma, placed it in front of the Venugopalaswami temple, and sang

While they showered flower after flower, they sang,

¹⁰⁹ Polluted by spit because the fish and frogs live in the water

¹¹⁰ Boiled gram

*I give my good wishes to you, Gouramma,¹¹¹
 Bless me, oh Gouramma,
 And when they slipped the flowers into the pond, they sang,
 Go to sleep, Gouramma, go to sleep
 Long live Gouramma.*

They sang this, clapping in rhythm and dancing around the Bathukamma. All the long-hidden silk saris shimmered that day. Over a week, they collected flowers, dried and dyed them, and after song and dance, took this to the nearby tank and immersed it all there.

During Diwali, traders burst a lot of crackers. It was a sign of status to burst bombs, especially the 'Lakshmi bomb.' We lit firecrackers and threw them at each other. When we lit these and threw them, they jumped all over and sizzled.

On the festival day, usually one or two people burnt their hands. Sometimes, the bomb accidentally burst in one's hand. Shops selling crackers opened ten days before Diwali. Children bought crackers and burst them while doing something else too.....those days, the pestle and mortar were made of iron. So we would put potash into the mortar and hit it with a pestle and make a satisfyingly loud bang. The sound of crackers could be heard before Dasara.

When the Bhudan movement began, landlords gave away lands which were not cultivable and lands in the possession of others.

Offering to Krishna something which flows away into the water

Reformists joined the Bhudan committee which was given huge publicity. Those who did not agree with the Bhudan philosophy called Vinoba Bhave a sarkari sanyasi, a government ascetic. The Bhudan movement was started to dilute the essence of the slogan, 'Land to the tiller.'

In our village, we hoped that the landlords would give away some land, but there were no big landlords.

One day, when an unexpected holiday was declared and we were all at home, Tati Guruvaiah, who worked as a hamali¹¹², and who was from my village, came to our room, told us that he had some work for us and offered us breakfast and tea. Very slowly he began to talk. 'There was a small panchayat. Elders came on behalf of my wife. They asked me to bring people from my side, and not knowing what else to do, I have come here to you. You must speak as I tell you,' he said. We agreed and went along with him. When we reached, Guruvaiah's wife and five or six elders were seated. One old man among them said, 'Why are you not looking after your wife, Guruvaiah? She does not eat or drink.'

'What don't I give her? Am I not getting provisions for the house? Am I not getting clothes for her? What am I not doing?' he asked.

¹¹¹ Parvati

¹¹² Head-loader

'That is not the issue, all these things are alright. Why do you not stay home at night? Where do you go?'

'I work as a hamali. Lorries come at night. We have to load and unload at night. That is why I don't stay at night in the house.'

` Do you have work every day? We know everything. Do you think we don't know where you go at night? Tell us, do you want us to drag your mistress here? Even if those committing a crime have no shame, those who watch have to observe propriety,' said another elder.

At that time, we chipped in, 'What is Guravaiah not giving his wife? Is he not bringing groceries or is he providing less than before?' Guravaiah had asked us to speak up in this fashion.

` Young children, keep quiet! You don't know anything.'

` Why don't we know?'

` You don't know; keep quiet!'

` We have come on behalf of Guravaiah. Why should we keep quiet?'

Another elder rose, 'Why don't you listen when we have been explaining all this while? You are young boys. What can you know about these matters? Alright, he looks after his wife well. But tell us, if he goes to a whore at night, who will sleep with this woman?'

We were baffled. We did not know what to reply to this question. We left, thinking that if we remained, we would not have a shred of self-respect left.

* * * * *

There was a big procession in the town, 'Land to the tiller, poramboke lands should be distributed.' From every village of the taluq came men, women, children, women with babies, bringing food and holding red flags aloft. The public meeting was held in the evening in the ground next to our school. Comrade Sundaraiah spoke in the meeting. White pajamas, half shirt, a scarf on his arm, this was how he dressed. We thought that such a great leader would have an imposing appearance. He looked very ordinary, but when he spoke, sparks flew from him. BN Reddy and Dharma Bhiksham also spoke in that meeting. I never saw such a big meeting or procession again. Suryapet was red that day, red flags rippling everywhere. People from villages gathered in huge numbers for a Communist party meeting. I loved red, I loved the processions. I joined them and raised slogans.

PART IV

After I completed class VII, I went into high school. This was a newly constructed building and built in the shape of an H with the meeting hall in the centre. The classrooms were

spacious with big windows and there was good ventilation. The school was outside the town with huge playgrounds. Some of my old friends had left and new students had joined. I took Maths as my optional subject. Sanskrit, History and Maths were the optional subjects. If a student was considered somewhat intelligent, he took Maths.

Ramakrishna Reddy, Lakshmanachari, Ramachandram and Lacchaiah also took Maths as their optional, and we all sat together on one bench. Lakshmanachari had rubber half-boots, Ramakrishna Reddy wore Kanpur chappals, Ramchandraiah, Lacchaiah and I had no chappals at all. Uptill now, I had not felt the necessity of footwear. The school fee was 5 annas per month. When some students applied for exemption, they got it. As I did not do this, I had to pay. Money was always difficult to come by. I went home on Saturday, stayed the following day and returned to Suryapet on Monday.

It was getting difficult to eat in a mess (informal hotel). Hence, all of us from my village, Bucchi Reddy, Biksham Reddy, Sadashiv Reddy and I took up a room opposite Ramayya Sir's house and started cooking for ourselves.

Ramayya Sir was the Hindi teacher in the high school. He was short and dark, smoked cigarettes, chewed pan and was a Gandhian. He wore a loose shirt and on top of that, either a coat or a waistcoat. For a very long time, he did not have children. Much later, he had two daughters.

The other boys from my village took another room on rent and studied there. Among them, Raghav Reddy and Narayana Reddy were in class 10. Another two, Bhagawanth Reddy and Shaik Chand were in Class 9. My classmate Malgireddy Nari Reddy also stayed there. At dawn, the pigrearers came, children and mothers of infants with uncombed hair and a vessel in their hands, shouting '*Amma – amma.. give us some food*,' shrieking all the while. Else there were quarrels. I was irritated by the shrieks. However much we yelled at them, they would not leave. We had to put some food, stale or fresh, into their vessels. These people had one rule. They did not go to the same bazaar every day. They changed bazaars. If someone went to the trader's house, nobody else went there. They never went to big bangalows. Not only did rich people not give anything, they also set their dogs on them. They went begging only to the houses of traders and middle-class people. They did not go to the houses of poorer people.

If one sadhu hugs another, only ash drops

Their needs for the time were met by begging. They also fed their dogs with part of this. Hence, the dogs never left their huts. Wagging their tails, they circled these people, who wove mats or stitched cloth rugs in the afternoon. Men ate what the women and children brought by begging and went into the town. Since the pigs roamed in the town, they looked after them, checked which sows had given birth to piglets, how many piglets, and whether they had marked these piglets. When the pig traders came, they discussed matters of sale, price, etc. Their huts were on the way to Kasrabad. In the evening, they fell on the toddy trees in Kasrabad and returned home, drunk, picking up quarrels with either their wives or their

neighbours, making a big din before going to sleep, worn out. In the morning, despite the quarrels of the night, everyone went about his or her work. People living near these huts never had a single night's peaceful sleep. There was one advantage however. There was no fear of robbers due to the constant commotion. Every hut had two dogs. If they heard the sound of another person, they barked continuously. Humans, dogs and pigs slept together in these huts.

One day, Ramaiah Sir, asked one of the women, 'Why don't you do manual work? Why do you beg every day?'

They replied, 'Ayya, we are descendants of Shiva. Begging is our profession. This has come down from centuries. That is why we don't go to work. Dora, we survive because of the mercy of people like you.' He said, 'We cannot change them, beggars will not stoop to toil.'

Since the beginning, when Shaikh Chand and I had been good friends, he came by sometimes, smoked beedis, and hid the rest on a high shelf. We studied by the light of a lantern. Within half an hour of doing so, sleep overtook us. We pretended as if we were studying, but could not overcome sleep.

In the morning, as soon as we cooked and ate, we went to school. After school, homework, then again cooking, then study. There was never any leisure.

Battery-run radios had just then become available. Ramaiah Sir bought one such radio which ran on a big battery. The radio played if it was connected to a wire, and to an antenna strung up between two poles on top of the house. Songs, news and music reached us on the radio. Programmes for children were aired on Sundays between 2 and 3 in the afternoon. Nyayapati Raghava Rao and Kameswari organized these interesting programmes well. We huddled by the radio at that time: many songs, so many dramas.

There was a library in front of our room. This opened every evening at 5 pm. Mats were spread out in the hall in the front and the daily newspapers placed. *Andhra Prabha* and *Andhra Patrika* reached us regularly. Newspapers came from Vijayawada and hence reached only at noon. Weeklies like the *Andhra Prabha*, *Andhra Patrika*, *Prajamata* also came. *Navvulu Puvvulu* and film magazines also came. More important than the news in the daily newspapers was the visual of the film released on that day or films to be shortly released. I did not appreciate news. As soon as I returned from school, I sat on the mat in the library and browsed through the papers. One had to pay 4 annas monthly to become a member of the library. One could then borrow books, keep them for a week and return them to take out fresh books. Chandraiah looked after this work. He was ten years older than me. Yet we became close, and called each other by our first names. He gave me the books I wanted.

Novels by Kovvali and Jampana were less than 60 pages. They were short romances. I read one every day. I liked them. *Detective*, a monthly started under the editorship of Tempo Rao was well designed and attractive. I found the detective stories by Kommuri Sambasiva Rao. Y.V.Rao and Tempo Rao thrilling and read this magazine from cover to cover. Shaikh Chand also liked the detective monthly and read it with me. At this time began the craze for 50 paise

detective novels. These books were pocket sized ones. Studio Keta, an artist, drew beautiful sketches for these novels. Artist Menon drew pictures for the detective monthly. This gave the stories a kind of completeness. Children's story books like *Bala*, *Balamitra*, *Chandamama*¹¹³, etc. were also available in the library. We loved *Chandamama* and *Bala*. The stories of kings and Vikramarka were very good in *Chandamama*. I became used to spending half an hour every day in the library.

Neela Viswanatham was from our village; he worked in the Communist party for some time and later, as a commission agent in the town. He stood on the route of the carts from our village laden with paddy and groundnut, and directed them to particular shops in the market. He advanced money necessary for immediate needs and then deducted it when full payment was made. If one wanted groceries, he arranged for them. Farmers picked up the groceries they needed, saw a film in the evening and by dawn, reached home. The Suryapet agricultural market was a huge one where farmers brought paddy from distant places. The rate at this market was quoted as the day's price on the radio in the evening.

A band always played at weddings. Khadar saab and Ramachandram were adept at playing the clarinet in Suryapet. Khadersahab was six feet tall and walked in front of the band, playing the clarinet, wearing a dhoti, tied in lungi fashion. He knew many kirtans, classical and semi classical songs, and played Tyagaraja kirtans mellifluously at the Tyagaraja festivals. The middle of his bottom lip had become white, blowing constantly on the clarinet.

Ramachandram played the clarinet for another band. He was fair and handsome. He played, dressed in a light blue shirt and white Glasgow dhoti worn in lungi style. His was a hereditary art and he was well respected. The bands were pleasing only if these two played.

During weddings, crackers were burst in the main bazaar. Some mildly drunk youth danced to the tunes of the latest films, to the beat of drums. It was pleasant to watch. Some spectators gave Rs. 5 or Rs. 10 to the musician playing the melam and requested particular songs from particular films.

A festival for the joy of young people!

Ministers stopped at the Suryapet dak bungalow and rested awhile on their way to Vijayawada or Khammam. Some small-time leaders, dressed in starched and ironed khaddar vests attended on the ministers, saying, 'Sir, I am so and so from such and such a caste. All my people are followers of the Congress, Sir.' They saluted and talked of this and that, and said that they would call on him when they came to Hyderabad. People watching this believed that this small time leader had returned after talking to the minister and could get work done at the Tahsil and Collectorate. The victim was then fleeced till he had nothing left.

Small time leaders, as soon as they woke, bathed and wore ironed clothes and made for the road. If they were not lucky that day, you would find them chewing pan. This was the daily practice of Suryapeta's 'chota' leaders.

¹¹³ a phenomenally popular children's magazine in Telugu, running for decades.

Vasu Photo Studio was opposite the lane that went to Kacheri Bazar, past the shops that sold hand pounded rice on the way from Bodrai bazaar to Krishna Talkies. Vasu was an imposing figure; he had framed photos of women and men that he had shot, oneither sides of the entrance to his studio. One of them was a single frame of a close-up of a man; next to this, the same man standing. Arre! How could two poses of one man appear in one shot! It would be nice to have oneself photographed like this. As I went that way, I lingered by these photographs. Some photographs appeared as if they had been touched up with colours. Vasu was always found washing prints in plates.

As soon as we finished our class and exams we took a group photograph. What a commotion! Vasu made us stand on two or three benches, shouting `*Ready, ready, one, two, three!*` Someone bent in one direction, another closed his eyes. Vasu finally shot the group. He stood the camera on a stand at a distance, covered it with a black cloth, said `*Ready*' finally, and clicked. Thus was my wish to be in a photo fulfilled.

We had to pass Kasrabad to go to my village. It was closer if one went past Kanchari Bazar. Kancharollu¹¹⁴ were always making brass pots and vessels with loud clashing sounds. Their children played with iron rings, with other children always behind them, also wanting to play with the rings; it was a comic game.

Shivaiah's house was after we passed this bazaar. His was an agricultural houseold with cattle and sheds. His father cultivated lands under the tank. His elder brother Muttaiah was already a teacher. He was friendly with the landlords, and played volleyball and badminton well. Shivaiah had a younger brother and sister. His younger sister was charming and called me 'elder brother'.

A little ahead stood the place called `*dampudu kottalu*,¹¹⁵ - paddy dehusking sheds near Achaiah's house. Beggars and nomads of the area stayed here. They begged in the town and slept at the temple. In summer, it was cool and pleasant under the stone arches. The landlords of Suryapet were Reddys, but the Nizam Government had given them the honorific of Rao. Hence they added Rao to the end of their name. Instead of Lakshmikanth Reddy, it was Lakshmikanth Rao. This man had a huge *gadi* in front of the lane to the Tahsil office. Workers, aadapapalu¹¹⁶ - many people stayed here. There were huge dogs too. I was afraid to walk in front of the *gadi*.

If you pass by, the dora will give you some work.

Lakshmikanth Rao was the vatandar.¹¹⁷ His clerk Venkateswara Rao was the patwari. He was the man who got all the work done. He bathed in the morning, marked his forehead with a huge dot of *kumkum* and walked about with his assistant carrying a bagful of papers. He was adept at deception, it was said. The dora trusted him.

114 Members of this caste worked with metal

115 A name given because there was time when paddy used to be pounded here

116 aadapapalu were girls of lower castes who were taken into rich Reddi households to sexually service the men, especially when their own wives were pregnant or away. The children of the aadapapalu also grew up in the *gadi*.

117 vatan was a hereditary right to work, such as the patel, patwari, etc.

One night when I asked my father for money, he said that he did not have any. When I insisted, he beat me. I left for Suryapet without eating dinner. It was a very dark night, but I kept on walking, uncaring, and grieving. I had to walk past two villages to reach town. Any movement at night in the village set dogs barking so I had to cross the village carefully. I had to cross a stream near Kesaram where the rocks were slippery. After crossing this, I had to climb the embankment of the tank full of thorny bushes. Utter darkness. The howls of foxes at a distance. It seemed as if there were fires at a distance caused by fire-demons. When I left home, I was not afraid, but after I crossed my village, I was so terrified that I wept. I reached Suryapet late at night, my heart thudding all the way. My father arrived at dawn. It seems that he had not slept all night. Only after he came to town and saw me, was he at peace. He gave me money and left.

My friend Shivaiah played hockey well. He was short but could run very fast. Similarly, Lakshmanachari was good at football. Both Shivaiah and Lakshmanachari were in the school hockey and football teams. The district level tournament was held in Nalgonda in December for two to three days. Those who went for these always returned bruised. If they won, they were abused thoroughly, 'How did you win? Do you think that you are heroes to beat us?' Whether they won or lost the last game, the player who sprinted to wherever the bus was, escaped a beating. That's what games in Nalgonda were like. Nalgonda was influenced by Muslims who dominated the games. If one wanted to play in the games, one had to be prepared for a beating.

Self Government Day was celebrated in March every year. That day, students took on the role of teachers and headmaster. Intelligent students took on the role of teachers, taking classes. Students also did on the work of the attender, sweeper and manual scavenger¹¹⁸. Chandraiah, our senior, who took on the role of the manual scavenger won the best prize. Those who worked as teachers dressed well. I played drawing teacher twice, and on those days, had to ask my friends for trousers, a shirt and chappals. The whole day was like a festival. At the end of it, those who took classes well, those who dressed and acted well as teachers, were given prizes, the announcements met with roars of applause and approval. We carried the prize-winners on our shoulders.

A Muslim boy was my friend though now, I cannot remember his name. One day, he asked me for food, saying that he was in class VIII, and eating in different places, every day of the week. My two roommates also agreed and we invited him to eat once a week with us. He came in this fashion, and ate with us. He was both grateful to us and humble, and we maintained him like this for one whole academic year. He did not come to us the next year. There were other students too who had to ask for food in this fashion. Some Brahmins and Komatis ate in the houses of their own communities. My senior Madanaiah stayed in this fashion in Bhongir Ramaiah Sir's house, doing housework and studying simultaneously.

118 In those days, all toilets were dry ones, and were manually cleaned by the scavenger

The houses of the Goundlas stretched from Mothkur Sriramulu's shop on the main road to the turning which led to Khammam. Their houses were all tiled. Their women sat in the doorways, calling out in village fashion, 'Come.....come... we have toddy, come in ayya.... brother brought in good toddy just now.' During summer, unable to bear their thirst, those habituated to toddy quickly looked left and right and slipped into these houses. They poured toddy into small glasses from big pots and also sold *guggillu* and spiced bengal gram to munch along with the drink.

Bairu Biksham was in D section. As we both liked to sing, we became friends. Because of this, I went to his house at the turning of the path to Khammam twice or thrice. There was a big neem tree in front of his house with a toddy pot hanging from this. Sitting in the shade of the neem tree, his mother called out, 'Anna, there is toddy, do come... I will give you good toddy, do come.' When she saw me, she asked me from which village I hailed. When I told her the name of my village, she said, 'My husband's sister lives there. Do you know her?'

'Yes, I do,' I replied. With this, I become close to her. Sometimes, she poured me two *kanchus* ($\frac{1}{2}$ litre mud container). It was during summer that I sometimes drank toddy. Bari Biksham was the only one in his house who studied. Both his father and brother climbed toddy trees.

Mangayya, the father of Lacchaiah who sat on the same bench as I in class, worked as a mason. His wife had died a long while ago after which Mangayya became addicted to liquor. He went to Kethepalli every day for work where a church was being built. One day he brought a ten-year-old girl home and told Lacchaiah, 'This girl is your sister.'

'Where do I have a sister?' asked Lacchaiah.

'Arre! After your mother died, I could not live alone. I met a woman while I worked at masonry. This is the child born to her. Her mother died recently of TB. You are a child, how could I explain these things to you?'

'Is this child the only one or are there others with her?'

'No, I promise on your dead mother, she is the only one. We have to arrange the girl's wedding.'

The son said, '*Who can believe a drunkard! Let the girl stay here.*'

After a month, one day, a middle aged woman came searching, asking for Mangaiah's house. Lacchaiah was at home at that time.

'Who are you, Amma?' he asked

'Didn't your father tell you? Didn't even this girl tell you?'

'Tell me what?'

'About me, about this girl.'

`My father told me that the girl's mother had died.'

`Let someone die in *his* house. Let a corpse come out from *his* house! Shame on him! He told me that he would show the girl to her brothers, but didn't bring her back for a month. I thought he would return today... tomorrow.... When he didn't return for a month, I asked the supervisors where he stayed, and they told me that it was near the paddy dehusking shed. All the groceries in the house are over. So he said that I was dead! 'She started weeping.

Neighbours gathered. This was the usual story, they thought and left for their homes. It was at about 8 pm when a drunk Mangaiah, still drinking, returned home.

The drunkard has no shame, just as one who sips¹¹⁹ has no shame.

From that day, both mother and daughter stayed at Mangaiah's house. Lacchaiah now had a sister *and* a stepmother.

In Anantaram, in front of our house, there were Telagas with the house name Sayarollu. Their houses were covered with hay or palm leaves. During summer, if one house caught fire, all the houses around also burned down. Neighbours came with pots and vessels of water to put out the fire. They poured water on their houses too so that they did not catch fire. Paddy, mango and groundnut stored in the houses were burnt as were clothes. It was because of this fear that after some years, we began to see tin roofs in villages.

Next to ours were the houses of Muslims. There were five to six households. Sheikh Chand's house was one among them. As soon as it was night, stones fell on their houses. These were small sized stones. They did not fall on people but beside them. This happened every Friday. Some people said that they saw a fair-skinned man. Another said, Look, I saw a fair-skinned man running away on that side. Some others complained that cooked rice in the pot had disappeared. Come Friday, and this was a spectacle in the village. Many people stayed up at night to watch the spectacle. If there were people, stones did not fall. They fell after people left. The Muslims called it the magic of the djinns. People came from neighbouring villages to watch the spectacle. Sometimes stones fell, sometimes not. Some did not believe the story of the djinns. Some said that it was neighbours who threw stones. This went on for two to three years. Unable to bear the harassment, Muslims later built their houses outside the village.

In the summer, Shaikh Chand and I fished in the nearby wells with rods and bait. He netted more fish than I. We also fished, blocking ponds of stagnant water.

The cinema had a big impact on us. All those romantic films persuaded me to think that I too must love a girl and marry her. There was a girl belonging to the Telaga (oil crushers) caste in front of my house who had lost her father. Her mother's name was Mattamma. They had some lands which they cultivated it with the help of their relatives. They grew vegetables and Mattamma went round the village, selling these. Anjamma was her only daughter. Mattamma

119 sipping directly from a vessel or cup is considered polluting

called my mother sister-in-law, and me nephew (also son-in-law).¹²⁰ When she had nothing to do, she came to our house and related her woes. Since her house was near ours, I went there sometimes during the holidays. Since I thought the name Anjamma was crude, I called her Anjali. The girl was very happy with this. Mattamma aunt would say, 'Nephew let it be, we are not refined people.'

By this time, the village school had grown to include class 7. Anjali was studying in class VII. She was a mature 14 year old. She grew up to be fair-skinned and beautiful. '*I shall have to look for someone like you and get her married, nephew,*' her mother would say. To this, I would reply hypocritically, '*What is the hurry? Let her study upto class 10.*' Her mother would reply, '*As if it is possible for me to do this! Her fate is already written.*'

Once or twice when no one was around and I tried to kiss her, Anjali said '*Chi! Go away,*' and ran away from me. She was very shy. I thought that my fate was like Devdas (with Parvati) in the film *Devdas*. By this time, all my friends had had affairs. I couldn't find anyone in Suryapet. I thought that as I had neither personality nor style, no one was attracted to me. I thought that Anjali was girl enough for me. I never revealed this to anyone, lest they teased me.

* * * * *

(Samson) Ramkrishnaiah Sir joined as our school headmaster. His wife Padma Samson was the headmistress of the girl's school. They were an attractive couple. SR played football well and often with the students.

Subbarayudu Sir taught English. He spoke well and also dressed neatly. It was our bad luck that he did not teach our class.

Seshagiri Rao Sir taught history. He was always in a pyjama and kurta and carried one or two Telugu or English books under his arm. If he had any time at all to spare, he would be immersed in reading. He was a very sensitive man and spoke in a refined manner. Every year we brought out a school annual with stories, poems and songs written by students. There were also some drawings. One year, they included a sketch drawn by me for the magazine. Two people rowing on a river on a moonlit night. Two coconut trees on the banks of the river, the leaves of the trees in the shadow of the moon. I had painted this in white and black. Seshagiri Rao Sir was full of praise for the piece. Two poems of my friend Ramakrishna Reddy were also taken for the annual, under the name Makarasri.

There was a lesson on Buddhist temples in our history book. It spoke of how Buddhism had spread and mentioned that there were Buddhist temples in Phanigiri, Jaggayyapet and Amaravati in AP. Phanigiri was near Suryapet on the road to Jangaon. We asked Seshagiri Rao Sir to take us there, saying that we wanted to see the temple. He agreed and said that we could go on a Sunday. About twenty of us prepared for the trip and went in a bus. Phanigiri

¹²⁰ Traditionally, the first choice for a bridegroom is either the maternal uncle or nephew. Hence nephew can well mean someone who is eligible to marry her daughter.

was a kilometre off the road. We walked and reached a small hillock near the village. The hillock was shaped like the hood of a cobra, hence the name Phanigiri¹²¹. On top of it was an immense vacant space. There were mounds covered with mud.

When we asked the locals what these were, they said that these were the graves of demons. At this, Seshagiri Rao Sir said that these were Buddhist mounds. At the time Buddhism was weakening, its followers would have covered the shrines with mud to hide them. If we dug these, he said that we could uncover the shrines below. We had gone with high hopes and returned after seeing only mud dunes. On our way home, we visited the Seetaramulu temple at the foot of the hills. We drank water from a well there and returned to Suryapet.

Another time, we said, 'Sir, let us go to another historical site. Undrugonda.' He agreed, and we left by the Jaggayyapet bus and got down at Undrugonda after crossing Durajpalli. As we walked a kilometre from the road, we saw the Undrugonda hillock. It was like a forest. We climbed the hillock slowly. It was surrounded by custard-apple trees and thorny bushes. As we climbed, we came to an entrance surrounded by rock walls. It looked like this was the fort. As we climbed into the fort, we came across the Mantrigari well. There was water in it, but no way to descend into it. Nearby was a peak called Bogamdani gadde. There were four entrances - Jala, Moola, Nagulapati and East Gate. These were all built with stone. As we climbed further up, we came across the Lakshminarasimhaswamy temple to the east. Close to it was a statue of Anjaneyaswami. Seshagiri Rao Sir said that the ruler of Rachakonda, Sarvagya Singabhupaludu had five sons. He gave a fort to each of his sons. Devarakonda, Urlugonda, Bhuvanagiri, Rachakonda and Undrugonda were the five forts. This was built in 1360, he said. Thus we had the satisfaction of seeing two historical sites.

I became close to Seshagiri Rao Sir. I borrowed the novels of Sharatbabu and Adavi Bapiraju, Veyi Padagalu by Viswanatha Satyanarayana, Chivaraku Migiledi by Bucchi Babu, *Asamarthuni Jeevayatra* by Gopichand and Chalam's novels from him. I read a book from start to finish. It is because of Seshagiri Rao Sir that I developed a taste for Telugu literature. I wondered where there was bride price any more.¹²² It is only after I read the play that I realized its greatness. I read all of Gurajada's works after that. Singing songs from the book *Enki patalu* by Nanduri Subba Rao also gave me great pleasure.

Bhiksham, a year my senior, drew pictures very well. My friend Venkanna and I planned to bring out a small handwritten magazine like *Chandamama*. We changed short stories that had appeared in *Chandamama*, sketched drawings and brought out two issues of the magazine. My friends were very happy. We called our magazine *Vennela*¹²³ and placed it in the

121 Phani=sake and giri=hilllock

122 Kanyashulkam (bride price) is a famous drama written by Gurajada Appa Rao

123 Meaning moonlight⁴⁵

library. We became a little popular after this and also a little more vain too.

My friend Yellaiah was in Section C. As a student, he was about average, but played kabaddi well. In the attendance register, he was called Yellaiah, but did not respond if people like me called him by that name. He beat us, saying that we should call him Jagat Pillai. He got enraged if someone forgot and called him Yellaiah. Why quarrel with him, we thought, and called him Jagat Pillai. We came to know the secret about this later. It seems that Gollas are called Pillais in Kerala. As Yellaiah was a Golla, he wished to be called Pillai. His brother's name was Narsimha, and he called himself Narsimha Pillai. The entire family began adding Pillai to their names.

There were four seniors from my village. They planned to put up a small play and invited the younger sisters of their friends to the village. They were Rambai and Lakshmibai, and came along with their elder brothers. We all stayed in the patel's house. We planned to stage a drama but did not decide who should play what role. Anyway, they came to our village. With all sorts of bits and pieces, we set up a small stage in front of the dora's gadi. We tied bedsheets as curtains and arranged a petromax light. When two girls from Suryapet agreed to join us, there was publicity that girls were dancing, and the crowds gathered. The girls knew two or three dances from films.

*Initially,
Oh, my friend, a dark Golla youth,
It was not an illusion, I was snared in his trap
He came to the orchard, my lover,
He ensared me and robbed my heart,
Oh friend, he was a dark Golla youth.*

We pulled off the dances. My villagers had never seen women dancing. As soon as they started dancing, the villagers began whistling. Yet we continued the dance programme without fear. After this, came the magician. Narayan Reddy played a small countrymade violin contraption.

*At the Naidu's house, near the black thumma (babool) tree,
What did the Naidu tell you, girl?
What did the Naidu tell you?*

Along with the songs, our programme lasted for two hours and was greatly appreciated in the village.

*I went to Sholapur, I bought half a kilogram paddy,
Do pound it, my girl, my dear girl.
I don't know how to pound.
If you can't pound, do sift it, my dear girl.
I don't know how to sift
If you can't sift, do cook it, my dear girl
I don't know how to cook.*

*If you can't cook, do eat it, my dear girl.
That is the way to talk, my husband! My sweet husband!*

When we joined class X, my friend Lakshminarayana joined us. They had their own house near Prakash Press in Suryapet. Lakshminarayana who alongwith his brother Suryanarayana, joined as a minor worker in the municipality. Their father Ramchandriah was an abkari¹²⁴ contractor. He visited Suryapet three or four times on abkari business in a bullock cart. He stayed one or two days and left.

Lakshminarayana used to smoke cigarettes. There were some rogues among his friends, from whom he picked up obscene stories and passed these on. Along with him in our class was also the son of the karnam dora from his village. Lakshminarayana hated him. Since the boy was only moderately good in his studies, Lakshminarayana found it easier to bear.

I went with Lakshminarayana to his village Bopparam when there were two days holidays. His father had snacks made in honour of his friend's visit. Their house was a bungalow – there were huge steps in front, leading to the house. There was always a visitor in the house, mostly to discuss the toddy and arrack business. There were minor conflicting resolutions. Elders gathered there gave judgement without Ramachakram's interference, though he had instructed them about this earlier. We stayed there for two days and returned to Suryapet.

Pandurangachari's father Shivaiah had seven sons and one daughter. As the town was expanding, he bought a site near the toddy trees on Kuda Kuda road and put up two rooms. He always had a hammer in his hand and was busy making a gold chain or a silver anklet. The household ran on his work alone. Since he worked well, he had a lot of custom. Pandurangachari always told us that he wanted to study engineering, but living in such poverty, we wondered how he could do. There was a girl among his close relatives. If he studied engineering, her parents were willing to give her in marriage to him. They had a jewellery shop, and there was also talk that they were rich. Maybe the wedding could take place.

Venkatachari sat on the bench in the first row. He was so short that nobody believed that he was in class X. So also Krishnamachari, who was Singachari Sir's son. Even shorter was Ramalinga Reddy. These boys studied well. We could not be compared to them.

Tall boys were seated in the last row. Seshacharyulu was thin and tall. So too was Ghalib. Both sat on the backbenches. They argued, one saying that Hinduism was superior, and the other saying that Islam was. Seshachari came to school with vertical caste marks on his forehead. His father Venugopalachari was the priest in the temple. Madhusudan Reddy was sturdy and not afraid of anybody, though he was not good at his studies. His father was a revenue inspector as also a big landlord. There were always four or five boys hanging out with him. He considered himself a dada¹²⁵. He did not care for me, but if anyone tried to pick up a fight with me, he obstructed them.

Kishtaiah Sir's house was in the lane opposite where we stayed in Bhongiri Ramaiah Sir's house. Kishtaiah was a local resident of Suryapet, and had agricultural lands. Sometimes he

124 Excise, dealing with government control on the liquor trade

125 Militant leader

told us, 'Your Ramaiah Sir is a Chupa Rustom¹²⁶. He copied my Maths paper and passed. He tells everybody not to smoke cigarettes, but smokes himself.'

Once when the children were making a commotion, the headmaster came over, 'Who is it, Ra, making this noise?' he asked. One student rebelled, 'Sir, you should not call us *arre, ture*.' Kishtaiah Sir was there. He caught hold of the student's hand, 'What, *ra*! I can't call you *ra*?! I called your father also in the same fashion.' The boy fled. On Sunday, he took his two buffaloes to the tank, grazed them nearby, and brought them back. He did not listen if someone offered to do the job for him. 'I alone will graze my animals,' he replied. Because of this, he was called Mad Kishtaiah Sir.

Kishtaiah Sir had three sons and a daughter. The oldest, Ramgopal had failed in the tenth and had been struggling since three years to pass the exam. If anyone asked Kishtaiah how his own son could fail, he would reply, 'There is a time for everything.' His second son Ramkishan was my classmate. Kishtaiah Sir loved his children immensely. He never assigned any work to them. The oldest was 20 years old, and wanted to marry. He began falling in love with the girl in front of his house. The girl's wedding was arranged elsewhere. Ramgopal could not digest this and swallowed rat poison. Everyone wailed and raised a hue and cry and took him to the hospital. They returned after two days when he recovered. Kishtaiah Sir laughed and said, 'My son had to fall in love with a girl whose wedding was already fixed.' The youngest was the only one who studied well. But how would Kishtaiah Sir allow him to study? If the boy got up early in the morning, his father said, 'Why are you up so early? Go back to sleep.'

Past Bhongir Ramaiah Sir's house was the asbestos roofed house of a trader. The family had left, the walls were crumbling, and only the roof remained. There was no one to sweep and clean the place. One day, Fakir Sahab came with this wife to Ramaiah Sir and asked, 'I want to stay for a month in that dilapidated house after repairing it.' Ramaiah Sir agreed, thinking that the Fakir would at least sweep and clean up the place.

Fakir Sahab went around in the day with an incense tray and peacock feathers to all the shops, got a few annas from them, and returned home by evening. His wife worked in the traders' houses, cleaning rice, removing broken and discoloured rice and paddy from it. She earned one or two measures of rice, and boiled this at home. This went on for about ten days. One night, a drunken Fakeer Sahab began beating his wife. Unable to bear his blows, she ran out of the house and wept loudly in the street. Once or twice, neighbours were amused, but when it continued, they were irritated. Sir called Fakeer Sahab to ask him what the trouble was about, but he was so drunk that he could not get two straight words out of him. Sir then asked his wife who replied, '*Sir, I am not really the wife of this Fakeer.*

If one hides things, they will rot.

My name is Manugu Ramulamma, I am from Tirumalgiri. We are Kapus (Reddys). I have two children and my husband is alive. We have land and oxen and cultivate land. This Fakeerodu came to beg in our village, roamed around my house for two or three days with smoke coming out from incense. I don't know what magic he wreaked, but one night, I left my children and house and came away with him. I don't know how and why I came away. I had a happy family life. My husband and in-laws are good people. This Fakeerodu told me

¹²⁶

Someone who presents a different face to the world.

to remove my bottu; he made me a Muslim. It has been two months since he has been taking me from village to village, and now brought me here. It doesn't look as if I can return to my village, neither can I stay with him. I can neither live nor die,' she wept loudly.

We had thought them to be husband and wife and were taken aback. Sir asked her if she was willing to be taken back to her village. 'How can I return? I have been living with this Fakeer for two months. Everyone in the village knows this by now.' We felt very sad.

The palm tree is not a house, the kidnapper is not a husband.

All of those in whose houses she had worked, along with my Sir, put together some money and gave her some Rs. 20. 'Take up some vegetable business, Amma, we will drive away the Fakeer from here. We will see that he does not come near you.' They told her to stay in the same place. Hearing all this, Fakeer Sahab put together his belongings and fled. He never returned. Ramulamma stayed in the same house and began to trade in vegetables.

Sir had a compassionate heart and loaned money to anyone who approached him with financial difficulties. Some came once or twice, took money, repaid, took money a third time and never showed their faces again. He was vexed with this,

If you show sympathy, you must bear the consequences for six months.

Sometimes he sent me to collect his dues. The borrowers would say, 'Come tomorrow, come the day after,' and make me do the rounds. The carpenter took Rs. 200 saying that he would bring wood and we never saw him again. I went repeatedly to his house, caught him one day and brought him to Sir. 'What! Brahmaiah, you took money. You said that you would bring wood for the door and windows. Since six months, you are making us roam about.' The carpenter said that his wife had fallen ill, the money was spent on her treatment and that he had been unable to show his face to us. I had gone about ten times to his house and knew that what he said was a downright lie. I told Sir so. 'These shameless people....! From now on, I will never give any money to anyone. Even if they die, I will simply watch,' he decided. Yet, when someone went to him with a sad story, Sir's hand would slip him money. He lost some of his money in this fashion. Those who took money rarely repaid him and his plans of making his tiled house a pucca one, were delayed.

The RSS¹²⁷ ran their training programmes for which every trainee had to have a white shirt, khaki shorts, black cap and a bamboo staff. They invited me to join them, but since I did not have these necessities, I could not go. Those who participated in RSS programmes were, by and large, the children of Reddys and traders. People like me were unable to join because we had no money, saw it as interfering in our studies and had no leisure time.

Sesham Raju Sir used to come neatly dressed to school. Sometimes, he came in a jacket and trousers, socks and shoes. He taught history. More interesting than the prescribed lesson were the small stories he narrated. There was scarcely anything that he did not know. He produced plays, acted in them, painted on huge canvases. He once produced a play, a copy of *Patala Bhairavi*. He had my senior Ranga Rao play the magician which Ranga Rao did excellently. Sesham Raju Sir had the stage decorated as a forest. He showed us trees and hillocks, making

it appear as if the girl was travelling in her lover's bullock cart.

The fast bullock cart of the Neelas, nera nera...
My lover came at midnight when I was asleep, nera nera..
He asked me to get into the cart, nera nera
I wore a silk sari, one white oxen, nera nera
One red oxen, nera nera
It rained, nera nera
We were drenched, nera nera
We passed the small forest, we passed the thick forest, nera nera
We passed all the forests, we united, nera nera

Kuberudu, our art teacher dressed in a dhoti and half shirt. There were two periods a week for drawing. He drew a circle on the board and showed us how to make a doll or a bird of this. One or two like me liked the class. The others did not bother about it.

Manikyam Sir who took drill class spoke English well. When a teacher did not turn up for his class, he substituted for him. He taught English grammar well. If he had been the English teacher instead of our drillmaster, we would surely have benefited from his diction and linguistic skills.

There was an atheist centre at Tallagadda which Gora sometimes visited. He held meetings at Gandhi park. Gora was an atheist and a follower of Gandhi. He wore khaddar clothes. While Gandhi chanted, `Hare Rama, Hare Rama,' Gora declared that there was no God. I never understood at that time how the two got along. Kana was in-charge of the Atheist Centre where atheists lived. My classmate Krishna also stayed here. He was two or three years older than me. While studying, he also repaired watches in the kamaan bazaar of Pet centre. People hardly believed that he was a student.

My friend Janakiramudu was three years older than me and used to paint. He became my friend in class X. because he could paint, he had some money to spare. He dressed well, wore white clothes and flirted with girls.

A retired teacher Rangachari lived near the Hanuman temple. When he retired, his children were still in school. His eldest son Ramachari was in my class. The other two were in classes V and VII. Sometimes, Ramachari came to my room and did his homework. I too went to his house. Rangachari Sir would be cutting vegetables. When we asked him, `Why, Sir, are you cutting vegetables?' he would reply, `I am cleaning the vegetables, removing the rotten parts and preparing it for cooking.' He called his children and wife in a loud voice. His wife would retort, `Am I deaf that you call me so loudly?' She moaned to us, `What am I to do with this madcap? When I ask him to get vegetables, he gets ones that are rotting, and then scolds me. He asks me why I cook so much. Don't growing children need to eat well?'

On the first day of every month, Rangachari Sir went to draw his pension. As soon as he received it, he got provisions and groceries and then, daily checked to assess how much rice, salt, lentils, etc had been used. If any retired person came by to talk to him, he bored them to death, saying the same things, over and over again.

Sometimes, he accosted me, `What a bad state of affairs education is in these days! In my

time, children shivered in fear.’ He always spoke of things past. His children never obeyed him. If he said, ‘*Arre, get me a glass of water,*’ or ‘*Go to our neighbour Rangaiah Sir, and get me the newspaper,*’ he was likely to hear the reply, ‘*Go yourself.*’

He started getting more and more forgetful. Sometimes, he got ready to attend a wedding that had been conducted a few days earlier. When friends told him this, he exclaimed, ‘Is that so?’ and returned. He never allowed anyone to finish their sentences and interrupted them constantly. Hence people also forgot what they had to tell him.

I saw Sri Sri’s *Mahaprasthanam* in SG Reddy’s bookstall. Mr. Reddy read aloud some poems in this to me. I liked them. I bought the book. The poems excited me.

*Another world calls us
Come on forward.*

I gradually learnt these poems by heart, sensing a freshness here, and lost count of the number of times I read it. I was given the book, ‘*Mother*’ as a prize for winning an essay writing competition. I read this from cover to cover, and it is a book that influenced me tremendously.

When my friend Ramalinga Reddy told me that the Communist Party was holding political classes for two days for party cadre and students in their office, we thought that since it was a Sunday, we should attend and so we went. They told us that the short and plump man was Devulapalli Venkateswar Rao. He started by telling us why the land struggle had begun in this part of the region first:

‘In Nalgonda district, the sangham distributed 3,000 acres in 150 villages. Razakars were rowdies. They were trained and given arms, formed into teams to supplement the Nizam’s army and armed police. If the Razakars came to know that sangham members had visited a village, they descended on the village and tortured young people. They looted the village. They grabbed ornaments from the necks and arms of women. They raped young women. They came mounted on horses. One night, the sangham members under Boorgu Anjaiah and Palasa Bhiksham, surrounded the Nakrekal police station, and shot the Razakars, along with their horses. The Razakars persisted in their goondaism. If a village refused to give levy grains, the Razakars descended on the village and tortured the villagers. When the terrified villagers left their houses and ran away, the Razakars burnt their houses. They surrounded villagers and beat them up and abused them.’

As he narrated this, he also explained how we must confront anti-democratic systems.

Every January or February, the Tyagaraja festival was held in the Gandhi park under huge shamianas. The programme started with the collective singing of the Tyagaraja kirtana, *Endaro mahanubhavulu andariki vandanamulu*. Chittoor Nagaiah came. Nerella Venumadhav’s mimicry had just started then. Venumadhav imitated Nagaiah in his presence and pleased him. Later, he imitated the sounds of stampeding horses in the film, *Ten Commandments*, and the singers Ghantasala and Bhanumati. Sthanam Narsimha Rao was 70 years old. He enacted a few scenes from the plays, Chintamani and Madhuravani. Even at that age, he looked handsome and dignified. Korada Narsimha Rao enacted the play Mohini Bhasmasura.

*Between the stars, the moon shone bright
 Oh, young lady from the east, come on with me.
 Oh, moon
 A rich man from my village gave five annas
 A rich man from your village gave twelve annas
 Oh, young lady from the east, come on with me.*

*I was born in Papannapet, I was raised in Papannapet
 Lakshmannadora came to live in his wife Pallope Durga's house
 He went to a distant land and brought big logs
 He built a seven storeyed bungalow, it seems, Lakshmannadora
 A neem tree in front of the temple, Shiva inside the temple,
 He called people and celebrated the jatra there, did Lakshmannadora.*

His niece Ratnapapa danced.

*I go to sell buttermilk in Madhuranagari,
 Let me go, Krishna, oh Krishna
 I will return this night,
 Don't hold my pallu so tight, Krishna, oh Krishna.*

A girl Krishnakumari danced to a folksong.

*In the maize field, in twilight,
 We met at the manche (check shikar)
 Don't forget me
 Stars on the hills, it is time to enjoy
 The paddy crop is ready for harvest
 It is time to laugh.*

Vedantam Satyanarayana Sharma's *Usha Parinayam* was captivating. Nataraja Ramakrishna came with his troupe of students. He was very handsome. While dancing expressively, he also arranged his flowing tresses. I saw two or three Tyagaraja festivals with much interest and I looked forward expectantly to these three days. Dance and music overwhelmed me in those days.

After the 1952 elections, the Congress and the Communists began fighting for supremacy in the villages. Old rivalries flared up. Police began filing cases against Communists whenever there were robberies in houses or murders in villages. In some villages, ransacking of rivals' houses, burning their cattlesheds and hayricks took place; the affected families left their villages. Agriculture suffered. It took years to get out of cases. However powerful one was locally at the police station, it was the Congress who ruled the roost. Even if the Communist party won the Assembly and Parliament seats, it was the Congress which had the upper hand with respect to administration. Unable to cope with the clashes, cases and related tensions, Communist party sympathizers often proclaimed that they were joining the Congress party.

Struggles on tenancy rights and wasteland encroachment intensified. The khasra pahani

(record of land rights) was prepared in 1956. The land we had purchased was not patta land. Many people whose lands had not become patta for long were now successful. Mamidala Venkateswar Rao, the brother of my friend Rama Rao worked as a revenue inspector. Sometimes, I went to their house. It was rumoured that Satya Sai Baba had come to the Suryapet Dora's gadi, and was manifesting holy ash, garlands and lingams from thin air for devotees. Devotees started arriving with fruits and flowers for darshan of Sai Baba. For two days in Suryapet, nothing else was talked about.

One day, Venkateswar Rao's wife, dressed in a silk sari with flowers and fruits wrapped in a cloth, left home for darshan. Her husband asked her where she was going. 'Baba has come to the gadi; that is where I am going,' she replied. 'Arre, silly woman, the Baba requires beautiful young girls to do puja. You are the mother of three children; who will look at you, you silly woman!' He ended saying, 'The husband is God; don't you know this?'

Satya Sai Baba was in the dora's gadi for two days. One night, there was some trouble there. People said that the dora, armed with a rifle, had chased the Baba upto Khammam,

From March, schools worked in a single shift. Examinations were nearing. We went to the church compound on the Khammam road to study; it was impossible to do so at home. There were mango and tamarind trees in the church compound. We sat in the shade of these trees. Prayers were conducted every Sunday in the church, but it was peaceful on the other days. When we were bored, we picked the tamarind still on the trees and ate them. Sometimes, we played a game. We never studied seriously.

Some students left their studies midway due to poverty and returned home to work. Rahman from my village also returned to Anantaram. Poverty did not allow him to study. Bhiksham Reddy too stopped his studies midway and went into farming. Malgireddy Ram Reddy came from a middling well-to-do family. He went to Khammam and was selected for the Army and enrolled for training.

Uptil now, the library was in a rented building in front of the house we stayed in. Government used some space in the PWD compound and built a new building. This was inaugurated in a grand manner. In this meeting, Viswanatha Satyanarayana read out verses from his '*Ramayana Kalpavriksham*,' and spoke for a long time. He was a powerful speaker and one was impacted strongly if one heard him.

When I was in class IX, Andhra Pradesh was formed on 1, November, 1956. Processions, meetings and rallies were held. All of us students participated in the procession. We raised the slogan, 'Andhra Pradesh zindabad.'

The Gavvas were the doralu of Pillalamarri. They owned most of the land. Gavva Leeladhar Reddy was my classmate. His elder brother Shashidhar Reddy was a revenue inspector. Theirs was the first house on the land in Suryapet, which led to Chelima Bavi. Sometimes, I went to their house. If his brother Shashidhar Reddy was at home, there was a commotion. His was an imposing personality. He always spoke in Urdu. The jamabandi camp was held on the verandah of their house. We children sat underneath a tree behind the house. I often ate there at night. Their father Murahari Reddy was an eminent scholar. He wrote the epic, '*Guntaka Puranam*.'

Soon, alcohol became more important than his job for Shashidhar Reddy. Once when the Tahsildar sent word to him to come, Shashidhar Reddy told the attender to tell the Tahsildar

to come himself. *‘I am a dora, why should I work for anyone else?’* Saying this, he threw up his job, ate and drank merrily, selling his lands all the while. The lands disappeared. If his wife protested, she was beaten, and when his mother protested, she was abused. Unable to bear this, Leeladhar and his mother left the house and started staying separately. They gave the rest of the lands on lease and lived on the proceeds.

Leeladhar was always with me. Summer had school running in a single shift. We went to the church compound as it was peaceful there. There was a girl living in a house in that compound. When we asked her for drinking water, she served us. People generally respected students. My friend, whether thirsty or not, often went to her house and chatted with the girl. At that time, she was studying class 9, and may have been 15-16 years old. Between this and that, they fell in love. Though she was not beautiful, she was not ugly either. She shone with the beauty of youth. Leeladhar got the girl to rob her mother’s two tola gold chain and both eloped to Jangaon. After the money was over, they returned, and he told us that he was married in a church. *‘How will you live?’* we asked him. He replied, *‘Let us see. There is still some land left.’*

Tati Jagannatham was my senior. He stayed near the Tahsil office with his maternal uncle. He wore his uncle’s shirts which were loose for him. He wrote poems that were published in our school paper. Though he was poor, he always got good marks in all his subjects. Teachers liked him very much. Another senior was Lakshmanamurthy. He always won the debating competitions. Whatever subject was given, he unleashed a flood of oratory. How many poems he quoted in between! His speeches attracted everyone. He topped in every subject. Maringanti Purushottamcharyulu was two classes our senior. He stayed near the Venugopalaswami temple near the Tahsil office. During school functions, he sang poems to music. He had a sweet voice. His poems were published in the school magazine.

Yadagiri Rao was a retired teacher. He taught English well. He was thin and short. Whenever he left home, he wore a suit. He tutored children of classes 8, 9 and 10 in 4-5 batches every day from 5-8 in the morning. He taught Maths too extremely well. If anyone went to him to be tutored, it meant that he would learn English well. So also Sudershan Sir. He was tall and hefty, one felt afraid to speak to him, but he was a kind man. I couldn’t go to either of them as I had no money. I was deprived of much in life because of this. Those who went for these tuition classes fared very well and learnt both English and Maths well. Those who had failed HSc and were not confident of passing even if they attempted a second time, and those who had stopped studies after class 7-8, came to Mallikarjuna Rao, who tutored them, and had them apply as private candidates for the Andhra Matriculation exam.

When it was time for us to go to school, Rajyalakshmi teacher also went to the primary school along with her little son. She was a Hindi teacher there. Her husband Viswamitra was the Hindi teacher for the middle school. I wondered how he was named Viswamitra as the name is odd, I found out that he was genuinely a Viswamitra – friend of the world. He came here as an Arya Samaj activist, settled down here, fell in love with and married Rajyalakshmi. He educated her and made her a Hindi teacher. When I came to know of this, my respect for him grew. I don’t know from where he hailed. But Rajyalakshmi was like a sister to us. When I came to know that she was Mothkuri Chilakamma’s daughter, my happiness knew no bounds.

Bucchi Reddy and Biksham Reddy, who were studying with me, stopped their studies because they ran short of money. It was now difficult for me to maintain a room and cook alone, as

also expensive. Pullaiah from neighbouring Potlapadu and his younger brother Brahmam had taken a room in the house of the Ganagollu near the Hanuman temple. They said I could join them, and I did so. I came to Ramayya Sir's house to study. There were 4-5 in the Ganagollu's house. Students cooking on their own stayed in all these rooms. There was a well but it was brackish. We had to get drinking water from Chelimi bavi. Otherwise the well near the tank also had sweet water. Pullaiah was a little gullible. We cooked food together.

There were also boys from Annaram in that house. Venkat Reddy was one year my junior. He was a good student of English. The others were about average students. Along with these boys was a middle aged lady, carrying a child, who also studied. She didn't seem to have a husband, though she wore a bottu. An Annaram resident had given her shelter and was looking after her, I learnt. He came once or twice a week. She cooked well, and also taught us to cook. She was good looking and always had a smile on her face. Her son was studying in class 4.

Acharya Hospital was near the Anjaneyaswami temple. Mallaiah who worked here for many years left it, became a doctor and set up a board,

Dr. Mallaiah, RMP
Cure for all illnesses guaranteed

His clinic ran well. Villagers with communicable diseases and women came here. He gave them some medicines and cured them.

Rajamma stayed on the Jagayyapet road. She was considered very beautiful in Suryapet. Those who had no work to do exchanged stories about her. One was that she had abandoned her husband and was friendly only with rich men. I wanted to see her. Every time I went to the bazaar, I wasn't successful. Lakshmanachari suggested a way out. It seems that Rajamma decked her hair with flowers in the evening, and stood on her threshold. I couldn't wait. I must see her somehow. Unwilling to go alone, I took Chari with me one evening and we began walking on that toad. From afar, Chari pointed out, *'Look! She is standing at the door! She is the one wearing a red sari.'* How beautiful she was! It was as if I was looking at a cinema star. We went ahead, but continued to look back. However long I looked, I couldn't have my fill.

Though the traveler has no money, he still desires the prostitute.

Shortly after, Rajamma fell ill and Dr. Mallaiah treated her. She became well but wouldn't leave Dr. Mallaiah. His hospital ran well. He cured patients with minor illnesses and also conducted deliveries. He was sure to cure women of gynaecological problems. He earned a lot of money but had no leisure. He became close to Rajamma when his hospital was running well. The doctor was now not to be found at home at night. When an emergency case came, the compounder went to Rajamma's house, pleaded with the doctor and got him over to the hospital. After dealing with the case, the doctor returned to Rajamma's house. Gradually, he stopped going to his own house. All the money that he earned went into Rajamma's hands. Along with this, the mild drinking that he earlier indulged in, had now increased. Within a year, his income dropped. Even if he had no patients, he could not stop going to Rajamma's house. He came to his hospital and sat about sorrowfully. He started drinking even at noon.

*When a woman is ruined, she gets onto a chair (becomes a prostitute)
When a man is ruined, he ends up cutting wood.*

For some time, the compounders ran the hospital. Finally, it closed down. In the end, Dr. Malliah had an attack of paralysis and returned to his house.

I stayed at home during the summer holidays. The Sairolu who stayed near my house had nets to catch rabbits. About ten of us left in the hot sun of the afternoon to trap rabbits. Smaller children ran faster, yelling at the rabbits so as to herd them into a group. I was part of this group. There were no crops in the fields, which were fallow. We tied nets in the hollows where there were bushes. Two of us waited. The others went to the slope above, tied nets, one holding it at each end, and waited. The others beat the bushes to chase the rabbits out. The frightened rabbits came running into the hollows and got trapped in the nets. In this fashion, we got four or five rabbits by evening. All of us shared these equally. The chase was very hot, but exciting too.

There were always small panchayats in the village. Elders dragged out the panchayat cases and hearings as there was leisure during summer.

Kunti Venkulu was a Dalit. No one gave him a girl (in marriage) for a long time. After a long wait, he finally married a girl and they had two children. He grazed his 4-5 goats, his wife went for agricultural labour and ran the household. Kunti Venkulu's wife was attractive, I must say. Someone lured her. Her children went to school, and her husband went grazing his goats far. Seeing the seducer entering her house, some boys locked the door from outside, called the neighbours and started raising a hue and cry. Kunti Venkulu returned home with his goats. He understood what the commotion was all about. With folded hands, he addressed the onlookers, 'Ayya! I am a handicapped man. For many years, no one gave me a girl to marry. She may be a whore or thief, but I married her and have two children. If this matter goes to the village panchayat, everyone will know about it. I will lose my honour. My wife will not stay with me. Let me live my life in peace!' Saying this, he removed the lock. By this time, the intruder had jumped over the wall and fled. His wife caught Venkulu's feet, 'They don't like me and did this to defame me,' she wept. Those gathered there left on their work. It was now known that Kunti Venkulu's wife was a faithful woman. There never was any commotion again in that house.

There was a separate high school for girls in Suryapet. During their sports competitions, the girls came to our school ground to play volleyball and kabaddi. This was huge entertainment for us and we cheered them vigorously.

I became friends with Tandu Narsiah, a year my senior. He was thin, wore white pajama-kurta, and was the first to join in any fight. A small conflict erupted in the group that cheered the girls in their games. Among the girls who played kabaddi one was fair-skinned and beautiful. When it was her turn to get into the rival space, some boys began teasing her. Another group encouraged the other girls' group. The girl's name was Rajyalakshmi. She became nervous and her face began to droop. At this time, my friend Tandu Narsiah got into the act and slapped the boy teasing Rajyalakshmi. The game stopped. Sensing some disturbance, both the drill master and the headmaster arrived. Everyone fled. When they asked who had been fighting, no one gave any names. 'I will find out for myself,' said the headmaster, 'and put an end to the commotion.'

The story of Tandu Narsiah really begins here. Rajyalakshmi had seen him. He was very dark and wore white clothes. He must be a special person, she thought. Romance bloomed. Narsaiah found out that Rajyalakshmi was the younger sister of a small time Congress leader and belonged to his own caste. He went frequently to the house of a friend staying in the same street as Rajyalakshmi, and every time, she spotted him. She began looking at him furtively. He told me all this. Though I was younger than him, he called me, 'Uncle.' We had no support, so I counseled him not to act in haste.

He took me to his village Tallasingaram. His father Tandu Veeraih was the abkari contractor for ten villages. Their house was like a small gadi. His father was a Goundla, but built a bungalow, wanting to compete with the Reddys. He had the name of being a bully in the village. There were always ten Goundlas in front of the house, discussing matters of toddy. There always was some commotion in the house.

His mother slaughtered a chicken as her son's friend had come visiting. I drank two glasses of toddy and stayed the night there. My friend asked me to carefully tell his story to his mother. After I had done so, he too would tell her, he said. All of us slept on the terrace. His mother asked me about my family details. After I told her all about me, I told her, 'Peddamma, my friend has seen a girl. She is a girl of your caste and is fair and goodlooking. She studies in class 10. He is in love with her. You must tell his father and make him agree somehow.' I narrated the whole story. She beat her chest and said that Narsaiah's father was a man of short temper. If he knows about this, he will not let either you or me live. 'What have you done, son?' she trembled. When I replied, 'The girl is goodlooking; everybody in your house is dark; is there anyone who is fair?' she calmed down. 'If you marry her, your father will not allow you into the house. Take up a job somewhere outside if you want to marry her,' she said. My friend became a little more courageous after this. The abkari contractor in Suryapet was a friend of Narsaiah's father. Let me tell him about the affair, he may help me to get a job, he said, and went to this man and told him everything. 'Okay, stay with me. After your father's anger abates and your exams are over, he will call you back himself,' he said. The road was now clear. My friend brought the girl one night to a temple and tied the mangalasutra around her neck. He started his new household in one room. Father and son had some minor quarrels but were soon reconciled.

Anantapadmanabha Sastri taught us Telugu and Sanskrit. He was experienced in Ayurveda too. Dhoti, shirt, and upon this, a kanduva, caste marks on his forehead and a tuft of hair behind. Such was his appearance. He was a good man. He spoke to children affectionately. Everyone respected him. He was the seniormost teacher and close to Bhongir Ramaiah Sir. He called me once and said, 'I have some work in my village. Will you come with me for two or three days?' I agreed to do so. We reached Narayanapuram Samsthanam. There was a beautiful fort and walls and broad streets. Most of the houses looked alike with tiled roofs. I felt that I walking on a royal avenue when I walked here.

Shastri's house was in the centre of the village. This house was open to ventilation on all four sides. There was a verandah in front. It was surrounded by rooms with a courtyard in the centre. Because of this, the house was well lighted and airy. He had no sons. His daughter would have been ten or twelve years old. I saw a middle aged 45 year old woman. She was Goddess Lakshmi incarnate. Golden hued round face, neither fat nor thin, well fashioned head and long tresses, even though she did not have many ornaments on her, she was

strikingly beautiful. I came to know later that she was the *aadapapa*¹²⁸ staying in Shastri's house, and thought that Shastri was indeed a good connoisseur. There were *bhogam*¹²⁹ women in the Samsthanam. Gradually, they began to be called *aadapapalu*. Narayanapuram of those days had a street which was completely theirs.

Adjacent to Narayanapuram was a small hillock. There was a beautiful Falaknuma palace etched on the big rock, but the art was in ruins. This was done some 300 years ago. If one climbed the hill, one could see all of Narayanapuram village from there. I stayed two days there and returned to Suryapet.

There were two to three houses of Kapus near ours. Mattaiah and Janamma were husband and wife. They had two sons. Mattaiah was somewhat gullible. He and Janamma went along with farmhands to the fields. Since she had come to their household, Janamma had added another three acres to their land. She was also very beautiful. We called her aunt. Their elder son Somayya studied with me for two years at Suryapet. He was two years older than me. Mattaiah fell ill and took to bed; unable to farm alone, Janamma got her son to stop his studies and return home. After some time, Mattaiah died. When I came home for the vacations, I spent most of my time in their house. I also went to the fields along with Somayya. During the groundnut season, he roasted groundnuts and brought home fresh green gram. Whenever I was in the village, I mingled freely with them.

His mother Janamma called me nephew and looked after me well. When their buffalo delivered, she gave me *junnu*¹³⁰ milk. If we had no buttermilk at home, she poured out a jugful for us. She wept saying, 'If the patel was alive, my son too would have been studying like you.' There was a difference of five to six years between Somayya and his younger brother, and the latter was studying in the village school. How might we educate him, was Somayya's concern. Unable to refuse marriage proposals from his maternal relations, Somayya married when he was 16 years old. For some time, the daughter-in-law was subdued. God knows how and why it happened, but she began disliking her mother-in-law. The daughter-in-law was not ugly, but not beautiful either. Though Janamma was middle aged, she was still beautiful. She had no *bottu*, but was Lakshmi Devi. If any man came to their house and spoke to her mother-in-law, the daughter-in-law would make up something about her mother-in-law and tell her husband. As she was his wife, he believed her.

One day during the holidays, I went to Somayya's house. I don't know why, but he was distressed. When I asked him what the matter was, he said, '*My wife makes up things about my mother and tells me. Should I believe her or not? People do come to my house, it is true. You know what kind of man my father was. She married an idiot and yet built a household. She added three acres to what we have. She raised us without our feet even getting muddy. She is educating my younger brother. My wife accuses such a mother of all kinds of debauchery.*' I was surprised, '*My aunt is not that type of woman. Don't we all have eyes? I don't know why your wife is making up all this. Brother, you and only you could know.*'

Somayya was still worried. Later, Janamma disappeared. There were rumours that Janamma had eloped with someone. A person from my village wrote an anonymous letter to the police

¹²⁸ Among the Telangana zamindars, when a girl was sent in marriage, a girl of similar age but belonging to the poorer castes accompanied her. The latter girl was meant to provide sexual services to the groom (especially when his wife was pregnant or had periods), and more often to men of the household

¹²⁹ Literally translated as women of pleasure, women of this community were forced to render sexual services to the zamindars

¹³⁰ The first milk of the buffalo after delivery. It clots on heating and is eaten with sugar.

station. It seems that Somayya had killed his mother and buried her in the channel leading from the tank. The police arrested him and tortured him till he confessed. When they dug up the channel, they found Janamma's corpse. Somayya went to jail for a few years. When he was released later, he was a changed person. He did not speak to anyone, nor did anyone speak to him. He sold two acres to pay his legal expenses. He had listened to his wife and gone the bad way. God alone knows the truth. Janamma had married an innocent man, that was the mistake. My beautiful aunt was killed in this fashion.

In Anantaram, my brothers were not doing well with no work for the loom. My kinsmen began migrating to other parts. Some went to Kasrabad, some to Husseinabad in the Nakrekal area. Houses began to crumble due to disuse. There was no one to clean them. My two brothers continued to stay in the village. My sisters-in-law went for agricultural labour work. They made do with the produce from the fields. The elder brother had more children. He decided to get his older daughter, my niece, married.

I had no work at home during the summer holidays. Nagabhushanam, the younger brother of Bhongir Ramayya Sir, had a kirana shop where he asked me to work. 'I will give you three meals a day,' he said, 'and Rs. 30 a month.' This was a good offer. If I worked for a month and 15 days, I would get Rs. 45 with food thrown in as well. I agreed. After class IX exams were over, I remained in Suryapet. I got up in the morning, fetched water, ate a little bit, and went to the shop. Handing over groceries to customers, dusting, cleaning – these were the jobs I did. I ate sugar, puffed Bengal gram and coconut in between. I felt that my great hunger for food was satisfied here.

Nagabhushanam built his new shop in the lane of the mosque. He asked me to fetch a painter to paint a signboard. I went to MHK and told him, '*My seth wants a signboard for his shop.*' He agreed and told me to go, saying that he would come; this happened once or twice. He was to write,

Bhuvanagiri Nagabhushanam & Sons Kiranam Wholesale and Retail.

They agreed on a price. He made me visit him another four times to write this though he sat idly in his shop. I became suspicious and asked why he wasn't doing the job, though he had no other work. He replied, '*If I write as soon as someone asks me to, can I expect to have anyone's respect? He will pay me less, knowing that I have no clients. This is why we make people come again and again. Don't tell your seth this,*' Such was the practice among artists.

I ate after the shop closed at 9 in the evening and went to sleep in Ramaiah Sir's house. I did not have to wait long to sleep, I was so tired that I slipped into deep sleep immediately. I worked like this for a month and a half till school reopened, and he gave me the money as agreed. I thanked Nagabhushanam and went to school. The film *Maya bazaar* was released this summer. It was very good and so were the songs in it. Ghatotkacha eating snacks, his mats rolling up by themselves and sailing in moonlight, was delightful.

I now had Rs. 45 with me. If I had to cook on my own, it did not seem possible that I would have time to study and pass class 10. Along with others from my village, I arranged to eat at Gajji Krishnaiah's mess. The same Rs. 10 and a measure of rice per month for one person. The food was good there. I went to school, returned and did my homework. What should I do after the Higher Secondary certificate course, HSc? I could not continue to

study for a Pre University Certificate as I had no money. I wanted to study Fine Arts. Potti Rangaiah was two years my senior. He was in the Fine Arts course. I met him twice or thrice when he came for the holidays. He said that one could get the post of a drawing teacher if one took this course. He was not as good at drawing as I was.

Shaikh Chand and Bhagwanth Reddy, after their HSc went to Adilabad to train as development workers. They said that they would get good jobs in the Block Development Office after this. Pandurangachari, Madhusudan Reddi and some others were keen on studying at the local Polytechnic. Ramchandriah and Lacchaih wished to do a teachers' training course. Lakshmanachari was hopeful of getting a good job somewhere through the sports' quota. Ramakrishna Reddy and I wanted to join the Fine Arts course. Anyway, we put these ideas aside, as we could think them only after we had passed the exam.

Eating in the mess was becoming inconvenient. Ramaiah Sir had a fallow orchard and a well near the tank. There was a small empty room on the site. Seeing my plight, he told me that I could have the use of that room. I cooked and ate there and went to school. I liked this routine. If there was any discomfort, I consoled myself saying that it was only for another 4-5 months.

I attended all the Communist party meetings at Suryapet. The sight of a red flag thrilled me. I venerated the red flag. I was happy to participate in processions. I loved to hear the speeches of BN Reddy, Dharma Bhiksham and DV Rao. My father hated the Communists so I never discussed the issue with him.

Avula Pitchaiah, a Communist leader, stayed near the Tahsil office. He had been working in the Communist party since the time of the Andhra Mahasabha. He ran a private bus from Suryapet to Atmakur. I sometimes went to his house where he told me all about the Andhra Mahasabha and how it had resisted forcible collection of tax and compulsory levy. Such stories excited and moved me and I lost myself thinking, 'One doesn't have to wait for Communist rule to come. Following Russia and China, our country too will become Communist. Then no one will have personal property. There will be communes and everyone will get enough food and clothing. We can all live happily and peacefully.'

Pitchaiah told me, 'The biggest land struggle in Asia was in Telangana. At one time, some in the Communist party had illusions about Nehru and diluted the vigorous movement. Even though they gave up arms, they were killed by the military. The Communists had left their properties and their own children and joined the movement, thinking that a Communist state would come about. After the movement was called off, they were implicated in cases and suffered a lot. Some were implicated in murder cases and given death sentences.

*He who climbed, got the horse,
He who wins, ruled.*

Those who suffered were the lower rung cadre,' he agonized. I did not understand all of it, but could sense that there had been betrayal.

Anyhow, Communists will rule, I thought. There will be no problem for food and I will join the party as a full-time worker. When I told BN Reddy this, he advised me not to be hasty. 'Finish your studies; we'll see,', he said. Not in a position to dismiss an elder's advice, I began

concentrating on my studies. Suryapet was a sea of red whenever there was a Communist meeting. When I saw this, I often fantasized that I was in Russia or China.

Lakshmanachari was tall. He was healthy because he played football. His brother was building the Yerrabadu dora's bungalow near home. The design was new. The dora brought masons from Hyderabad for the new design, as he did not feel that the Suryapet masons could execute them. Among the Hyderabad masons was Babaiah maistri, who came with his family from Hyderabad and rented a small house on Kuda kuda road. He had five pretty daughters, the eldest in class IX in the girls' school, and my friend Lakshmanachari was very attracted to her. Every day, he circled their house. We came to know about this gradually as he did not tell us. Finally, he showed us the girl from afar. He boasted that he would somehow marry this girl. The girl's name was Radhika. She was stylish, and well, she came from the city. She saw him roaming around her house, and began looking at him furtively, then began smiling at him. He told us what happened on a daily basis. We encouraged him. When a tournament was held in Nalgonda, our friend in the football team and Radhika's selection to for her school's ringball team resulted in both going to Nalgonda. They now found opportunity and spent two days together. He bought her biryani in a hotel. She told him that she liked him and would marry him, and placed her hand in his. Not immediately but after he got a suitable job, she said.

Shifting in the bed all night, thinking of the wedding night, it had become morning.

My friend was ever so happy. All this was known to everyone in both teams. The rest of were a little jealous.

* * * * *

I liked music and when I asked BN Reddy who wrote the song *Bandenaka bandikatti*,¹³¹ he sang the song himself,

*Oh, Nizam,
Going in a procession of sixteen bullock carts,
In which cart are you hiding?
With the support of the police and the military,
You looted the villages, you looted houses
Suryapet beyond, Nalgonda in the centre,
You stay in Hyderabad, beside it Golconda
We will dig your grave beneath the fort at Golconda,
Oh, Nizam*

BN Reddy said that that song of erstwhile burning history which could even today inflame people, was sung by the warrior Yadgiri. `He belonged to Elkapalli in our taluq. During the summer of 1947, he sang this song while the dalam was walking. This was a fragment of lava from the heart of a warrior who had really suffered.'

`The squad was coming towards Suryapet. After it crossed Tirmalgiri, they heard movements, took up position near the ragi (peepal) tree, and started firing with their native weapons. At this, the military approached and began chasing them. Yadgiri was killed. He died fighting in the historical movement in which we took part. This was the song sung by this hero. During the struggle, many peoples' poets composed songs. Among them was Bayyam Rajaram from

¹³¹ A very famous song of the Telangana movement, its signature song, almost often sung with different people as the villain

Kadivendi. Listen to this, BN Reddy said,

Suvi, Suvavunnalara....

We make the sound, 'suvi' while we pound the paddy

Who are the warriors passing by?

These are the children of Andhra roaming in the forests, these are my children

Rifle in their hands, they jump into battle heroically

They yearn for the rule by farmers, these warriors.

Gurvininja¹³²

My people are coming, turn the herd, guriginja

The messengers of Yama, the sinners¹³³

They came to Telangana like mad dogs

The landlords' armies – they camped in the village, guriginja

They caught all the villagers, men and women, guriginja,

They tortured them, guriginja

During the struggle, many people who worked in the Andhra Mahasabha or the Communist party, joined the Congress. Agricultural workers, poor and middle-class people remained with the Communist party.

Of all my problems, food was the biggest. I must pass the exam, but there was no one to guide me. Everyone was in the same boat. I tried sometimes to write poems and stories. But that did not work out, however hard I tried, so I gave it up, thinking that this was not my line. I continued to study continuously.

My friend Mansur Ahmed's father was the jagirdar of Khasimpet. His bungalow was next to Rajaiah Sir's house. His father had died. His mother, he and his younger sisters lived there. This was a big bungalow built long ago. It was somewhat dilapidated because repairs had been neglected. Ragi (peepal) trees grew out of the walls. They were jagirdars only in name; nothing remained now.

Only birds can eat what is cultivated by Muslims.

There were tenants on the lands that remained. They neither bought the lands nor allowed anyone else to do so. Yet, Ahmed's family managed to sell little by little to these tenants and drag on through life. We teased him, 'What is your problem? You are a jagirdar.'

Once during Bakrid, I, Lakshmanachari and Krishna Reddy told him that we would visit him at home, 'You must give us a feast,' we said to which he did not respond. Even so, we went to his house in the afternoon and when he gave us badam kheer, we drank it and sat around, talking idly. It was at about two in the afternoon when his mother called us in to eat the meal. We washed our hands and feet and sat on the dastarkhan cloth. They placed plates before us and served rice. Before us were placed four enamel bowls. When Ahmed said, 'Please eat,' and we removed the lids of the containers, we found only mango pickle in all of them. 'Take this, take that,' he said and served us with much affection. Later, they brought another vessel

132 The red seed with a black dot of a certain plant

133 Referring to the Indian Army

which they said was the sour dish. This was pacchipulusu,¹³⁴ with which we ended our meal. My friends' mother spoke to us lovingly.

`My son called his friends for the festival. I wanted to prepare so many things, son, but could not get money nor a loan. This is a feast cooked by a poor woman, don't misunderstand,' she wept.

`Don't worry, Amma, we are very happy.' We wished our friend Id Mubarak and left. Our friend's heart was a noble one. What he served was not important, how he served us was. We greeted this noble soul silently.

BN Reddy contested the 1957 elections as the Communist party candidate and my friend Ramalinga Reddy and I joined the comrades to campaign in villages for 20 days during which time, naturally, I couldn't study. My love for the Communist party did not allow me to stay away. BN Reddy won with a great majority in those elections.

I knew Telugu, Maths, Science and Hindi quite well but English was difficult. Maybe I was careless in studying English from the beginning, but I was unable to master it now and was ashamed to be so. As the exams approached, I learnt the answers by rote. I studied the important questions that the teacher had asked, but simply could not form answers on my own. I thought that I would score well in the other subjects. Since there was nothing more to do now, I could only try to do better after passing this exam.

Meanwhile, my father wanted to get me married. *`I may die soon, who will arrange his marriage?'* This had started two years earlier. My elder brothers were married when they were only 14 years old. Similarly, he wanted to get me married with my mother playing chorus to him. All they wanted was to get me married, but did not worry how I would live after that. This time, I knew that I could not escape. I got ready to see a girl in Tippiarti. In those days, I used to wear a half shirt and shorts. How could I go to meet a girl with just shorts on? I borrowed a kameez and pajamas from a friend.

The poor Brahmin had no hair. They stuck some hair on him and got him married off.

My parents and I went together to Tippiarti for the bride viewing. She was fatter than I, and it was not going to work. Saying that we would send word, we returned. I thought that I had got rid of the problem. Two months later, my parents started the war again. This time, they said that there was a girl in Yelkaram on the road to Jangaon. I agreed and we left one Sunday to see her. We reached Yelkaram. The girl was led in to where we sat. She was a hand taller than me and dark skinned as well. We said that we would send word and left.

Arvapalli where my paternal aunt lived, is near Yelkaram. We thought we would rest there and reached by night, walking all the way. Arvapalli is a pilgrimage centre. Devotees visit every day for darshan. My aunt Salamma ran a small shop there. She sold snacks, puffed gram and sweets., and in the evening, fried stuffed chillis, coconut and incense sticks. Her husband and son also worked in this business. They were originally from Nomula near Nakrekal. As work on the loom was failing, they had come here to eke out a livelihood. They had earned enough to buy a small plot in Arvapalli and had set up this small shop. The work was good and they had enough to eat. They hosted us well.

¹³⁴ Often, the only side dish eaten by the poor with rice. It is literally spiced tamarind water.

Before we went to bed, my father told Aunt Salamma why he had come. She heard everything, and told us about a likely family she knew. Chikku Satyam was an Ayurvedic doctor in Nakrekal. He was not only related to us, but was also from Nomula. During police action¹³⁵, he had left for Nakrekal, set up medical practice there and ran his household well. While praising his good qualities, she also said that they drank tea every day, a sign of relative wealth and sophistication. My father seemed to like this alliance. At dawn, we left with my uncle, and passing through Jajireddigudem, and crossing the Musi, reached Nakrekal by dusk. Since Chikku Satyam was closely related to my uncle, we stayed there for the night.

Chikku Satyam's father Lakshmiah was also a doctor in the family tradition. He had come before the police action to Nakrekal from Nomula. People from surrounding villages came here for treatment. His reputation for right diagnoses and treatment grew. There were no hospitals nearby. One had to go either to Suryapet or Nalgonda. Satyam's clinic was on the main road in Nakrekal. In his clinic, tablets and potions were kept in glass almirahs. Adjacent were the handloom weavers' cooperative society office, a mosque and a police station opposite.

In the morning, my uncle told Satyam why we had come. 'The boy is a good boy. He is in Class X.' They thought that I had potential for good employment in the future and arranged for me to see the girl. She was neither fair nor dark. She was about 12 years old, and was studying in class 4, they said. 'The girl is a golden doll,' said my parents. My uncle was delighted.

No one asked me for my opinion. Well, whatever happens will happen, I thought, and we came away to Suryapet. My parents went home. In a week, Satyam sent word that the alliance was acceptable to them, and that they would come to see our house.

There is a private bus to my village in the morning which goes upto Miryalguda. Chikku Satyam and his brother-in-law, along with an elder, came in this bus. As the bus went past the Durajpalli hillock and on the bullock cart way, it raised much dust. When the visitors saw this, would they want to give their girl to a boy from this area? This was a land of hillocks. When they arrived and saw our house, it seems that they decided against the alliance. They left in the evening for Nakrekal. The hillocks, the bullock cart road, the condition of our house and that of our village – when they related all this, Satyam's wife, aunt and their other relatives, strongly felt that they should not go ahead with the alliance. It was Satyam's determination alone to have an alliance with us that broke their resistance. After the weeping and moaning was over, they decided on a date for the wedding. Now the wedding was settled, but there was no money for expenses. There was only the house we lived in. My parents got Rs. 300 when they put it up for sale. Thus, my house was sold for my wedding.

I had told them that my H.Sc exams would end on April 9. But they decided, after consultations with the Brahmins, that the night of April 9 was an auspicious time for me. The last exam was over by the noon of April 9, the wedding was to take place the same night. There was no bus at that time. I hired a cycle. Since I could not know cycle too well, I walked the cycle till outside the town, looked for a rock, balanced myself, jumped onto the seat and started pedaling. I pedaled slowly. If I found a lorry or bus approaching, I got down, and reseated myself after it passed. In this fashion, I reached home. They were waiting anxiously for me and were happy to see me. We left on bullock carts for Nakrekal and reached.

135 Police action was in 1948 when the Indian Government sent the Army to subdue the Nizam who refused to accede to the Indian Union

By the time, the wedding was over, it was midnight.
My wife's name is Kamala.

*Oh moon,
The tree grew on the snake hill, oh moon,
The creeper spread over the earth, oh moon,
A flower as big as a field, oh moon,
The creeper went upto Tirupati, oh moon*

*This creeper gave a tiny fruit, oh moon
It gave fruit in Kanchipuram, oh moon
This fruit as big as a horse, oh moon
Grew to the size of an elephant, oh moon
Became as red as the setting sun, oh moon.*

*Peddireddi Somireddy plucked the fruit, oh moon
His finger was pricked and bled, oh moon
He went to the north, oh moon
To the Yeraganti pond, oh moon
He washed his finger there, oh moon
The water turned red, oh moon*

THE END